



novelization

Adapted by ELIZABEGT RUDNICK Screenplay by The Walt Disney Studios



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Once upon a time, there was a kingdom governed by a fair and virtuous king and queen. The kingdom was nestled on the edge of a magical forest, and while the magic of the forest filtered in and made its presence known, it was in the smallest and simplest of ways: crops that blossomed year after year, gems of every color that came from deep caves and sparkled in the sun, the sound of children's laughter echoing in the air. For the most part, the people went about their daily lives pleased to have such a lovely village, such kind rulers, and such abundance. They did not want for anything. It was the way it had always been for as long as anyone could remember.

In turn, the King and Queen felt lucky and loved. Their castle sat on a hill, surrounded by large trees that gave them shelter from the sun, and around the heavy gray stones lush flowers grew wild, their scent filtering in the open windows during the summer and lingering even in the dark days of winter. From their balcony, the King and Queen could look upon the village and see joy on the people's faces as they wandered through the open gates of the castle, meandered by the stalls at the weekly market, or stopped to talk with neighbors. Often the couple would look at each other, their eyes sparkling, as they realized how lucky they were to have such a life.

And their joy grew when the Queen learned she was to have a child. The King and the people rejoiced at the happy news. Everyone was certain

that the good luck of the kingdom would be bestowed upon the unborn babe. Eagerly they awaited its arrival.

One winter's eve, a powerful blizzard descended upon the kingdom. Snow whipped around the castle, blurring the sky and blocking out the stars. The wind snapped and howled like an angry animal. Windows blew open, and water froze in the fountains.

Inside the royal bedchamber, the King and Queen were oblivious to the storm outside. As snow flurried into the room, the royal pair stared down in awe at a most precious gift that had arrived—a gift that brought light in the darkness. Together, they watched as a single snowflake landed on their daughter's nose. She crinkled her nose, making them laugh. And in that moment, the storm faded, as if unable to remain in the face of such wonder, beauty, and love.

To honor the night on which their daughter arrived, the Queen and King named her Snow White. And from the moment she was born, she was an ember of warmth and light. She radiated goodness to every creature. She brought a smile to the face of everyone she met. And as she grew, so did the magic and love that surrounded her.





Snow White looked at the apple tree above her and wriggled in anticipation. It was her favorite time of the year. The long winter was over, and spring had finally warmed into summer. Now the air was thick with the scent of the fruit that hung from the trees, and it buzzed with the sounds of bees and other insects making their way from one plant to the next. Above the orchard, the blue sky was cloudless, and the sun's rays were bright. Smiling at the sight of the juicy red fruit, Snow White imagined how sweet it would taste—if she could just reach one. At nine years old, she was still small, and even when she was atop her father's strong shoulders, her fingertips did not stretch far enough to touch the high branch she was reaching for.

Beneath her, she felt her father laugh as she wiggled and mumbled and tried to get to an apple. And then, just when she was about to give up, the branch magically bent to meet her. With a squeal of delight, she plucked an apple from the tree. Smiling in thanks, she waved the apple in front of her father's face and held on as he lowered to one knee so she could get off. She dashed to her mother and placed the apple in a basket at her feet. Around her mother's ankles swung the hem of her yellow dress, the same warm hue as the sun that was sinking lower on the horizon.

Snow White tugged on the dress, knowing her mother would prefer she be a bit more ladylike, even in the orchard. But before her mother turned, Snow White was running back among the branches, her hair flowing behind her, the orchard a glorious playground. She brushed her fingers along the bark of the trees, dipped down to pick a long blade of grass, and then bolted forward to race a bunny that had hopped into view. Picking up an apple from the ground, she paused to take a breath.

Snow White loved coming to the orchard with her parents. Here the three of them were just a family, without any of the royal trappings that came with their position. Snow White didn't mind being a princess. In fact, she loved it. Her father and mother always left the gates to the castle open. Villagers wandered the royal grounds as easily and comfortably as they did their own homes. And the royal family was a familiar sight in the village, and all adored them. They especially adored Snow White. No one could resist her shining wide eyes or her infectious smile. To Snow White, the people in the village were almost as much her family as her parents were. But while she loved them all, sometimes it was nice to be with just her mother and father.

And there was another reason she loved the orchard.

It was full of magic.

The trees moved, winged creatures flitted through the air, and in the great expanse of woods beyond, all manner of magical folk made their homes. It was one of her father's greatest joys that the humans and magical creatures had learned to live in harmony with each other. They respected each other, and in turn both flourished. Many a time the King had taken Snow White with him to look over the fields and forests and told her of his wishes for her—for his kingdom. It was not enough to be a bold leader, he told her; it was important to be a fair one, to appreciate the wonders all around, from the fruit on the trees to the gems below the ground. Everything served a purpose, he said, and everything should belong to everyone.

Snow White knew this. Her whole life she had watched the way her father had worked together with other kingdoms and with his own villagers. He had always been generous. Her mother teased him for it in her sweet singsong voice, with a smile tugging at her lips. It was the same smile Snow White saw when the three of them stood in front of the castle's wishing well

and looked down at their reflection. Her mother, like her father, was always imparting words of wisdom to Snow White—wisdom laced with kindness and the same generosity of spirit that lived in her father. Because of her parents, and their love, she had learned what was most important: to be fearless, fair, brave, and true. It was her parents' wish that one day Snow White would rule the kingdom in this way and that hearts and doors would always remain open.

Hearing her mother call her name in her soft voice, Snow White looked up. Her mother was now surrounded by baskets upon baskets of perfect apples. The Queen shrugged with a smile as they both took in the abundance. Snow White's eyes moved down to the single apple she held in her hand and then back up to the baskets. *There are so very many apples*, Snow White thought. *We can't possibly eat them all*....

Her eyes drifted past the orchard, to the kingdom in the distance. She knew how hard the villagers were working to prepare for the upcoming harvest festival. Wouldn't it be wonderful if her family could do something sweet for them? A smile spread over her face as she ran to her mother and father, her idea bursting from her lips before she had even come to a stop. She wanted to bake pies ... for everyone ... in the castle kitchen.

Not waiting for an answer, Snow White bounced away. Behind her, the King and Queen exchanged knowing looks. There was no stopping their daughter when she got an idea in her head. It was one of the many things they loved about her.

As day faded to dusk, the royal family made their way home. Flitting around them were fireflies, flashing gold and yellow as they lit the way. Her heart full, Snow White clutched her parents' hands, dreaming up what she would bake the next day.



The morning of the annual harvest festival dawned bright and clear. Snow White had spent most of it making sure everything was in order for her part of the day. After gathering the apples in the orchard, she and her parents had baked dozens and dozens of apple pies in the huge castle kitchen. Snow White had hopped between the two large blue ovens, making sure the

piecrusts weren't burning. While her mother chopped up the fruit, Snow White bounced around the other pie-making stations, taking eggs to one helper and flour to another. When her father called out for sugar, she skipped over, a bowl of it in hand. The room had quickly filled with the scent of baking apples mixed with cinnamon, making Snow White's tummy rumble and her mouth water with anticipation.

Now the pies were finally done and it was time to take them into the village to share with everyone. Snow White couldn't wait. As soon as her parents were ready, they made their way out of the castle.

The air rang with happy shouts as the villagers called to one another in greeting. A band played in the village center, and a few folks had already begun to dance. The atmosphere was electric, and a familiar warm feeling of joy filled Snow White's belly. The harvest festival had always been her favorite celebration. But that year it seemed even more special, because she could give back to the people who gave so much to her family.

Snow White set up the pies on a long table and helped her mother and father cut huge slices and hand them out. Little kids peeked out from behind their parents, smiling shyly at the royal family until Snow White grinned right back at them and offered a warm piece of pie. Soon the pie was gone, and as the sun began to set over the far hills, the band picked up the beat.

Tapping her toes in time, Snow White sighed happily. She felt her parents' eyes on her and turned, giving them a soft smile. Right there, in that moment, she sensed the love of the whole kingdom. Her heart nearly burst with the beauty of it, and she lifted her fingers to trace the soft petals on the crown of flowers she wore. It was the first time she had been allowed to wear a crown, and even though it wasn't real, it made her feel beautiful.

Snow White spotted a young girl standing at the edge of the crowd, and her smile faltered. The girl—not much younger than her—was looking longingly at the dancers. Snow White knew her own parents were waiting to take her home and get her to bed, but she couldn't leave. Not yet. She quickly made her way to the girl. Stopping in front of her, she saw the young girl's eyes widen as she fumbled into a curtsy. Snow White laughed and shook her head. There was no need for that. This was a day when *everyone* should feel special. Snow White lifted the crown from her head and placed it gently on the girl's head. Then she took the girl's hand and led her onto the makeshift dance floor. As she began to walk her through the

steps, other children followed, and soon Snow White was surrounded by the village children, their laughter as beautiful as the music.

Snow White danced and sang until she was too tired to stand. Just as her eyelids drooped, she felt her father's strong arms lift her and carry her back to the castle and to her room. There her mother placed a kiss on her forehead, and feeling lucky and loved, Snow White fell into a deep, peaceful sleep. At nine years old, she felt secure, her love safe. She was certain nothing could ever ruin the lovely life she led.

But unfortunately, life does not always work out the way one expects. And soon sorrow slipped into Snow White's life.





Snow White stared down into the wishing well. Made of gray stone worn smooth over the years, it sat atop verdant tiers. In the placid water, she saw her reflection staring back at her. She looked like a shadow of herself. Her red lips were faded, her cheeks ashen. Her long hair hung limply. She looked like her heart felt: broken.

Sighing, she stepped away from the wishing well. She knew she was making a wish that couldn't come true: the wish that her mother would come back. That she could stand there beside the well and feel the warmth of her mother's body on one side, her father's on the other, like she used to. But since her mother had passed away, the warmth had gone.



Thunder boomed and lightning flashed, piercing through the darkness toward a portal ... a portal that looked like a mirror.

At the same time, a voice rang out. "Spirit in the Magic Mirror, come from the farthest space. Through wind and darkness I summon thee."

The voice belonged to a beautiful woman with dark eyes who stood in front of the ornate mirror. The rumor that had spread across the land told of a sorceress who possessed a magic mirror, which would answer only one simple question.

"Magic Mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?"

The woman's reflection morphed into the visage of a phantom—one enveloped in flames. But the woman was not dissuaded. She waited anxiously for the answer.

"You, my lady. Of all the women reckoned fair, your beauty is beyond compare. In grief, the King has lost his way—and beauty's power will hold great sway."

The woman stopped her pacing and looked back at the mirror. A plan slowly started to form in her mind as she exhaled—her thoughts full of wicked relief and evil contentment.



Snow White began to wander aimlessly around the flowers, their sweet smell filling the air and growing stronger as she touched the petals. She almost smiled. Apparently, they hadn't gotten the memo that the Queen was no longer there to enjoy their scent. Snow White brushed a hand over a particularly beautiful rose and lifted her fingers to her nose. The smell was of her mother. The ache in her heart returned with a vengeance.

Her father always told her to be fearless, fair, brave, and true. But she found it harder these days. The King was broken, as well. His wife had been the love of his life, and without her there, a light had gone from his eyes. Still, he did his best to keep Snow White happy. He read her stories at night, told her tales of the Queen to keep her memory alive, made sure the windows stayed open in the summer to let in the warmth and closed in the winter to keep things snug.

It had been over a year, though, and Snow White could tell it was becoming harder and harder for the King to find joy in his day. Even the yearly harvest festival had brought him little happiness on that day. They had both gone through the motions, but Snow White could tell his heart was not in it. As soon as the music faded, her father excused himself to the throne room, his expression sad once more.

Now Snow White made her way there, wishing she could fix it all and knowing that was impossible. The least she could do, though, was keep him company.

She had just taken her usual spot by his side when she heard a murmur ripple through the room. Half a dozen villagers had made their way into the castle with hopes of talking to the King about the harvest. But now their attention was drawn elsewhere. The air seemed to spark with an energy that had been missing for months. Turning to see what was causing the commotion, Snow White saw a woman enter the throne room.

She stifled a gasp. The woman was the most beautiful person Snow White had ever seen. Her eyes were a deep brown; her dark hair was pulled back in an ornate updo, showing off her long, graceful neck. She wore a green-and-gold dress in a pattern that reminded Snow White of a peacock's tail. It shimmered in the candlelight, the long train gliding behind her. As she strode forward, her steps were confident, despite the many eyes glued to her.

Enchanting.

That was the word that came to Snow White's mind as she watched the woman approach them. Her beauty was beyond compare. She dazzled, and Snow White could see a warm smile on her lips. An unfamiliar feeling fluttered in Snow White's chest, and as she turned to her father, the question of who this woman was dwelled on her lips.

But she quickly realized it didn't matter who she was or where she came from—not to her father. The King was rising to his feet, his eyes locked on the woman's, and for the first time since the death of her mother, Snow White saw a flash of emotion cross his face. Stepping forward, the woman offered him her hand.

Bowing low, the King lifted it to his lips. There was something powerful in her beauty—something almost otherworldly and magical. Like the forest beyond the orchard, full of mysteries one wanted to uncover. Clearly feeling Snow White's eyes on her, the woman took her hand from the King and brought her focus to the girl. Holding out a single red rose, she offered it to Snow White. Raised to be polite, Snow White took the flower. It was perfect, and so simple.

But as she brought it to her nose, the flower crystalized into diamonds in front of her eyes. The court gasped, wooed by the magic the woman

seemed to yield.

Snow White looked up, her dark brown eyes locking with the woman's equally brown ones. Smiling, the woman stroked Snow White's cheek with her fingers, and then, as if satisfied that she had done all that needed to be done, she focused once more on the King.

Snow White stood and watched as the pair moved away from the throne. Everyone, including the King and the court, was now under her spell.

So no one but Snow White noticed when the rose in her hand turned to ash. As the ash caught on a gust of wind and blew out the window, Snow White sighed. She wanted her father to be happy. And the woman was certainly beautiful. But she knew that outer beauty did not necessarily mean beauty within. A small knot of doubt formed in her stomach. Her father was sad and lonely. She worried that the woman's beauty might distract him from finding out what she was like inside....



Snow White's fears were quickly realized. The King and the woman were married within the week. The new queen quickly began to make changes around the castle, and the warmth Snow White had briefly seen in her smile disappeared. Now the Queen walked around the castle, closing windows, shutting doors, keeping the King from his court and the villagers beyond. A coldness took hold, and the Queen could often be seen walking with the King, whispering warnings in his ear of dangers that threatened them from outside the castle walls.

For her part, Snow White tried to be kind to her new stepmother. She gave her space and respected the Queen's changes. She did not think to go to her father when she saw the Queen lingering in front of the large ornate mirror in the throne room with an unfamiliar expression on her face. The look had been hungry, driven—much like the looks Snow White had seen on the hounds before they were let loose on a hunt. It caused a sliver of worry to build. Who, she couldn't help wondering, was the Queen's prey? Was it her? Her father?

But still she tried to understand the woman. Perhaps she had been mistaken. Perhaps the Queen was thinking of things greater than them. Perhaps she had grown so fond of Snow White's father that she felt the need to defend him. Yes, Snow White told herself. That was it. For the Queen was certainly fearful. She constantly spoke of dangers beyond the walls. But there had never been reason to fear the world beyond their kingdom up until then. The forest and the magic there had always been welcomed and respected. So Snow White wasn't sure the Queen's fears were warranted. And she could not get that look out of her mind.

But one day, the Queen found a note, tucked under her pillow.

It was a message, written in blood, warning of a great danger to come from the woods. The Queen had been right all along. Someone wanted to harm them. And worse, the person—or persons—who wanted to hurt them was from the very world the Queen feared the most. No one could argue with her any longer. There was proof now. And that was all the King needed.

As he raced out of the Queen's chambers, his expression was dark, and he barely gave Snow White any notice as he strode past her. Seeing the anger in his eyes and having heard about the note, Snow White ran after him. She knew he would not let any harm come to his new wife. He hadn't been able to save Snow White's mother. He would not fail the Queen. "Father!" she cried. "What are you doing? Where are you going?"

But he didn't answer. He just made his way swiftly toward the stables, strapping on a gold breastplate as he went. The soles of his tall green boots hit the ground with resounding clacks, and she saw the hilt of his sword beneath his swinging cape. The Palace Guard members were already mounted and waiting when they arrived. Word had reached them. Snow White's eyes flashed back and forth over the men she had grown up with. They wore black clothing, and heavy metal chestplates hung from their shoulders. They had never before looked so serious. Usually they were nothing more than ornamental, trotted out for parades or an occasional royal visit. But now their swords were drawn, and underneath them, their armored mounts pawed the ground with their hooves, responding to the tension in the air.

Snow White took a deep breath, trying to be brave. She thought of her mother and what she might do in that situation. She would be calm, Snow

White thought. Regal. But then Snow White let out a cry and ran to her father. She threw her arms around him and hugged him. She felt her father's arms pulling her in tightly. For a long moment, they just stood there, father and daughter, locked in an embrace.

Finally, the King pulled back. His eyes were soft when he looked down at her. He brushed her long, dark hair out of her eyes. Snow White leaned into his hand. There was so much she wanted to say: *Don't go! Stay! Don't leave me*. But the words would not come.

As if sensing his daughter's struggle, the King pulled something from behind his back. He lifted it for Snow White to see. It was a locket. The small silver heart dangled from a thin chain, and engraved on the back were four words: *Fearless, Fair, Brave, True*.

A sad smile tugged at Snow White's lips. Those were the words her father had repeated to her every day since she was a child. The characteristics of a good king—or queen. And now he was giving them to her.

Leaning forward, the King placed the locket around her neck. "Hold it close until I return to you," he said.

Then, without another word, he mounted his white stallion. He kicked his heels, and the horse took off, cantering out of the courtyard and through the castle gates. Snow White could do nothing but watch as her father disappeared, with the Palace Guard and the Huntsman following.

Snow White lifted her hand to the locket. *Fearless. Brave*. She ran her fingers over the words. She wished she felt fearless at that moment. Or brave. But she only felt scared. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw her stepmother watching from a balcony above. The woman met her gaze briefly, and then, without a smile or any sort of comforting gesture or word, she turned and went back into the castle.

Snow White had never felt more alone.





Snow White gazed into the well. Every day since her father had left to find whatever "danger" was lurking beyond the castle walls, Snow White had gone to the well and wished for his safe return. Day after day, she whispered, "Please come back." And day after day, the well was silent, offering no answer.

Her stepmother didn't offer any answers, either. Snow White had tried in the beginning to ask the new queen for news. But she was always met with silence or a wave of the hand. So she had stopped asking and gone back to wishing and hoping.

But with each passing day, it was harder to keep her hope alive. The Palace Guard had not returned. Nor had the Huntsman. It was as if they had vanished. No matter how often Snow White repeated her wishes or ran her fingers over the words on her locket, she didn't feel fearless, fair, brave, or true.

There were reminders of all that had changed. The portrait of her father and stepmother that now dominated the portrait gallery. The doors to the locked rooms that used to be open—the library, the music hall. All because her stepmother did not find a "need" for such things. And the woman herself, whose icy beauty kept Snow White at a distance.

In her chambers, the Queen paced. She was growing anxious. Not because her husband had yet to return. She knew he never would. Instead, her anxiety stemmed from her stepdaughter, Snow White. She had seen the girl down by the wishing well with her eyes full of tears. Still she was beautiful. Her sadness almost made her more so, because despite it, the girl clearly retained hope that her father would return, love for the village she was no longer allowed to visit, and dreams of a better life ahead. It all poured out of her even in the darkest moments.

And that bothered the Queen.

Letting out a deep breath, the Queen approached an alcove of her chambers. Her long black skirt swished about her legs, with its fine fabric rustling as the train followed along the stone floor. It pleased her slightly to pretend she wore black in mourning for her missing husband. The truth was she liked the color—or the lack thereof. It brought attention to her sharp cheekbones, her dark brown eyes, and her auburn hair—attention she relished.

She stepped into the alcove and paused. An ornate mirror hung on the wall. It was one of her most prized—and powerful—possessions. Its surface reflected the dark room, and then, as the Queen approached, her face came into view. She arched one perfectly plucked eyebrow and gazed at herself. Yes, she was still beautiful. But was she beautiful enough?

Lifting her head, she spoke, her deep voice steadier than her pounding heart. "Magic Mirror on the wall," she began, "who is the fairest of them all?"

She waited, forcing herself to stay still. The mirror was not just any mirror, after all. It was her most valued and trusted adviser.

Suddenly, her reflection burst into green flame. Through the flickering glow, another face appeared. It belonged to the phantom of the mirror. The Queen allowed herself to edge closer, unable to stop her desire to hear what the magical mirror would say.

"You, my queen," the mirror replied. "Of all the women reckoned fair, your beauty is beyond compare."

The Queen sagged with relief. She had never doubted her beauty or power before—not until she had met that blasted Snow White, with her ruby-red lips, raven hair, and perfect complexion. And the joy. Ugh. It made her sick to see what joy Snow White brought to others simply by being near them. She was a threat. Of this, the Queen was sure.

But Snow White was not more beautiful than the Queen was. The mirror had said as much. So let the girl have her adoring villagers and her youthful good looks. They would fade in time. Loss would do that to a person. And Snow White had lost everyone.

Satisfied, the Queen turned and left the alcove.

There was work to be done. She had a kingdom to ruin—or rather, run—after all.



As the days drifted past and the King did not return, a dark shadow spread across the village and the fields beyond the castle walls. The magical creatures did not venture from the forest to spin spells, and the sun did not dare to shine as bright with the Queen in charge, so crops withered on the vine. Food became scarce, and the farmers and shepherds were forced to accept the only job offered now—to be members of the Queen's Palace Guard.

Snow White, now dressed in rags and forced to work as a servant, stood still and silent as a maid pulled a pair of scissors out of her pocket and began to hack at Snow White's beautiful hair. Strands of black fell to the ground. Under the orders of the Queen, the maid cut and cut until the long locks were gone.

But if Snow White had dared to look at her reflection, she would have seen the truth: her beauty still shone. For even in her darkest hour, she had a radiance that could not be dimmed.

Ordered to take everything of value, the Palace Guard began in the village. They pulled down paintings, statues, tapestries and brought them to the Queen, who hoarded them like a dragon sitting on its pile of gold. And any image of the old queen or reference to the King was destroyed and replaced with the current queen's own insignia and image.

Soon the village was bare, and the pantries nearly empty. Those who remained stayed hidden inside, fearful of setting off the wrath of the Queen. Even the birds and animals had fled the village, seeking solace in the distant woods. All that displeased the Queen was banished, and the only magic left was dark magic. The castle gates were shut and bolted. And where once there had been a celebration of life and joy in the world, now there was just a cold, dark castle that cast its shadow and blocked out the sun.

If a villager had dared to look up one afternoon, many long days after the King's disappearance, they might have caught sight of the Queen, standing on her balcony. It was her favorite perch. And if they had been able to get close enough, they might have seen the smallest of smiles flash across her face. It was a smile of victory—for she had won. The kingdom was hers, the people frightened into devotion.

In the heart of it, Snow White remained, though the Queen's constant berating and cruel comments took their toll, dampening her spirit. The Queen wanted Snow White never to forget that it was she, not Snow White, who ruled now. She looked at Snow White as but another mouth to feed, another one of her workers. In time, even Snow White began to think of herself that way, forgetting that she had ever been called Princess.

But while she forgot, some remembered—those who loved her most. And in in the dark of night, they would whisper her name—like something out of a myth. Even as the days wore on, there were those—like the little girl Snow White had bestowed her crown on—who did not forget. Standing by the town well under a starry sky, the little girl clutched the flowers to her chest. And then she watched in despair as the last of the petals fell, dropping onto the still water, rippling the surface. *Where is she?* the little girl wondered. Where was the princess born on the coldest of nights who had the warmest of hearts? And would she ever return? Could she bring back the light that had been stolen?

Or would they live in the Queen's shadow forever?





Eight years later ...

Snow White slowly cleaned the floor around the scullery with a worn mop. It was a futile task. Then suddenly, somewhere down the hall, a large crash disturbed her peace.

"Hello?" she called out, leaning on her mop. But no one answered.

Setting down all her cleaning supplies, Snow White walked carefully and silently down the hall, determined to investigate. Peeking around the corner into the kitchen, she found a young man filling a sack with potatoes.

"I'm sorry—is there something I can help you with?" she questioned.

"Oh, that's okay. Just browsing," he answered.

"I'm going to have to ask you to put those back," she said.

"You know, I would. But it looks like the Queen has plenty already," he informed her.

Snow White was taken off guard. "Oh, I see. So that's your excuse for stealing?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Actually, my friends are hungry. I'm hungry. That's my excuse."

Snow White felt her resolve begin to soften. There were a lot of people going hungry in the kingdom. "Maybe I can speak to the Queen," she said.

But the man just scoffed. "You think any of those people upstairs would share a crumb with people like us?"

She felt herself becoming defensive. She would have, of course, and so would her father. The people of their kingdom were of utmost importance to them. She decided to speak her truth. "The princess would. Snow White."

The man looked at her with a skeptical eye. "No one's seen or heard from Snow White in years. I doubt she's going to be much help to anyone __"

Feeling flustered, Snow White interrupted him. "All she does is think of how to help her people...."

"Well," he said, "you should let her know, at some point, it might be useful for her to stop thinking and maybe start doing."

But their conversation was interrupted as the Queen's Huntsman appeared down the hall and gave orders to the guards. "Seal the doors. There's an intruder in the castle!"

The man offered Snow White some food. "Take some for yourself. You can give the rest to your princess."

With that, he hurried out, leaving Snow white alone and shaken by his words.



Nervously, Snow White ran her hands along the rough fabric of her dress. The simple garment was faded from wear; the small flowers that had once been bright red were now a dull pink. When she was younger, it had swallowed her thin girlish frame. But now, at eighteen, she had grown out of it. The skirt was too short for her long legs, and the bodice was tight at her waist. A blue-and-white checkered apron did little to cover the various stains. She didn't dare complain, though. She was lucky even to have the dress. Her stepmother did not like giving anything—to anyone.

She swallowed. The thought brought her right back to the very thing that had been on her mind: how to ask the Queen for a gift. She had been practicing the request for days, more and more frantically as her birthday approached. Now, taking a deep breath, she tried the speech out one more

time. Holding her broom in front of her, she spoke to the three birds and a squirrel who seemed to be offering squeaks and chirps of skepticism.

"Well, I at least have to try," she told them. "Maybe no one else has even told her. If the Queen had any idea how desperate things have gotten, I'm sure she would be happy to share...."

But the animals voiced their dubiousness, which caused Snow White to laugh. "You can't be sure of anything, I suppose, but even so ... I believe that she'll listen to me."

She turned and moved toward the wishing well. Peering at the water, she saw her reflection staring back at her. Her hair was still short. The Queen had demanded it stay that way. Her cheeks were flushed from her speech rehearsal, but her dark eyes, which once upon a time had twinkled, were flat. "I am still the princess Snow White," she said to the water.

"Snow White," the well echoed.

"Even if you're the only one who can remember ..." she said.

The well said her word back to her. "Remember ..."

Snow White shook her head. She knew she was being childish. She was eighteen, and talking to herself was something she had done when she was younger, desperate for companionship. But old habits were hard to break. She needed someone to talk to—even if it was, technically, herself.

It was time to see the Queen. The woman expected a daily check-in, after all. Snow White would use it as her excuse to bring up her request—maybe.

Making her way through the halls toward the dining room, she said hello to the few servants and guards left in the castle. Even though it had been eight years since her father had left, it was still a shock to see the castle so empty, so lifeless.

Snow White arrived at the doors to the dining room. She hesitated. What would happen if she didn't go in? What if she just went to her chambers? What could the Queen do—make her life *more* miserable? She sighed. She had the same thought every day, and every day she pushed it aside in the hope that this time, when she walked in, the Queen would welcome her with kindness. It hadn't happened yet. But Snow White was nothing if not optimistic.

Entering the room, she paused to look at the long ornate table. As always, it was covered with far more food than the Queen would ever eat.

Beautiful flowers were arranged in the center, and the finest cutlery had been laid out. *Such a waste*, Snow White thought as she approached her stepmother. *There's no one to impress*.

"Snow White," the woman said, not looking up from her plate. A nervous servant shuffled in and refilled her glass, then crab-walked quickly away. "Have you finished your chores?"

"Y-yes, Your Majesty," Snow White stuttered.

"It's important we all do our share," the Queen replied. As she spoke, she lifted a pearl spoon from beside her plate and dipped it into a crystal cup of caviar. She brought it to her mouth, a faint sneer on her lips as she devoured the delicacy.

Snow White took a breath. It was now or never. "Th-that's what I came to speak to you about ..." she said, her tongue tripping. "Sharing."

The Queen's spoon slowly lowered to the table. Her eyebrow shot up. Then, with a snap of the Queen's fingers, a servant appeared with a chair and placed it right next to the Queen.

Nervously, Snow White sat.

The Queen took a pair of silver pliers and cracked open a lobster claw. Snow White cringed. Was she imagining it, or did the Queen seem to relish the violent breaking? "Please. You were saying?"

Snow White's fingers itched to hold her locket, which was always around her neck. It brought her strength, and she needed that now. But she didn't dare. The Queen despised the trinket—like she despised anything else that had to do with life "before." Squaring her shoulders, Snow White mustered up her courage. "Y-Your Majesty," she began, taking a deep breath. "People are struggling, and it may not be much, but when I was young, my parents and I would pick apples and we'd take them and make pies. And we'd go out into the village and—" Her rush of words was stopped by the way the Queen peered closely at her.

"Pies? Pies are luxuries. They don't need luxuries. It confuses them." The Queen picked up her crackers and began to work on another lobster claw.

Snow White shook her head. She didn't believe that. She didn't think pies were a luxury. A memory flashed in her mind: a wisp of a scent of freshly baked dough and sweet apples. It made her chest ache. She had to make the Queen understand. "But sometimes something small, something

sweet, even, can make you remember that there is more to being alive than mere subsistence."

The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. For a moment, both women sat, surprised by what Snow White had said, the truth she had pointed out, the implication she had made—that the Queen didn't know everything.

Then the Queen shook her head, and her face grew stony. "You know," she snarled, "I really don't remember you being this ... opinionated."

Snow White looked down at her lap, where her finger traced one of the faded flowers. This was not going as planned. "My apologies," she whispered. "It's just I feel they need some kindness."

Suddenly, the Queen froze. Her eyes widened as she took Snow White's chin in her hand and moved her face to catch the light that fell from one of the high windows that surrounded the room—the light that reflected Snow White's inner grace and elegance and highlighted the clear, pure beauty beneath the smudges and rags.

"I-is something wrong, Your Majesty?" Snow White asked when the woman continued to stare at her. It was making her even more nervous than she had been before.

The Queen released Snow White's face and slowly pulled the heart necklace up from around her neck. "Fearless. Fair. Brave. True," she read. "How quaint." But there was something in her voice, something that made her sound uncertain. Snow White had never heard it before.

But as quickly as the moment had come, it passed. Lifting her chin and dropping the necklace, the Queen reached her hands out to Snow White, who reluctantly laid hers on top. "Maybe if your father returns, he can share more of his wisdom."

Getting to her feet, she gestured for Snow White to do the same. Then, taking her by the arm, she led her toward the door. "But in the meantime, here's a tidbit for you: observe...." She took a rose out of a vase that stood near the door, and she began to twist it in her long, thin fingers. "Ravishing, isn't it?"

Snow White wasn't sure what the Queen was talking about—herself or the rose. But she nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Before she could finish, the Queen turned her hand, and Snow White saw a flash of its back before the Queen flipped it over again. The Queen was holding a walnut-sized diamond between her fingers. She lifted it to Snow White's face.

"One is weak. Useless. Fragile. *Pretty*," she whis-pered harshly. "The other hard. Unyielding. Flawless. Everlasting. In short, *beautiful*." The flower dangled from her left hand as she held the diamond in her right.

Snow White looked back and forth between them, trying to figure out what the Queen was getting at with her little show-and-tell.

"My subjects don't want a flower," she snarled. "They want a diamond." Slowly the rose in the Queen's hand crumbled away to dust.

Snow White opened her mouth—and then closed it again. She had a very good feeling who the Queen thought was the flower. And she certainly didn't want to be destroyed. She moved to leave, but before she could open the door, it swung inward.

Dragging a scruffy young man by the collar of his shirt, the Huntsman entered. Snow White shivered. The Huntsman had once been her father's right-hand man. Now he was the Queen's lackey. And the man he was dragging was the same one Snow White had seen in the pantry.

Despite the danger he was clearly in, Snow White saw a twinkle in his eye. He looked back and forth between the women, reading the energy in the room—and finding it lacking for anything other than drama.

The Huntsman cuffed him on the back of the head to silence him and then turned to the Queen. "Your Highness, this criminal was caught in the scullery pilfering royal supplies."

The Queen, however, was less than impressed with the look of the man before her. "Are you one of the bandits that gather in the forest—stealing in the name of the King?"

At the mention of her father, Snow White's breath caught. If these bandits were stealing for him, did that mean they thought he was alive? *Was* he alive?

The thief shook his head. "No, no, Your Majesty," he said. "Not *one* of the bandits. I'm the boss. Loyal to the one true king."

The Queen had had enough. Snow White saw a dangerous glint in her eye, and then she spoke, her words directed at the Huntsman. "Find his home and burn it to the ground."

Her demand did not have the desired effect. "Funny thing is," the young man said, his face a picture of innocence, "I don't actually have a home."

Snow White bit the inside of her lip as she saw a look of exasperation cross the Queen's face. This thief was far braver than she would have given him credit for. Or perhaps he was far more foolish. Talking back to the Queen was something no one did—ever.

"Then take him to the dungeon," she snarled. "Fill the castle with his cries."

For the first time since he had been dragged into the chamber, the thief seemed to falter. Snow White saw fear flash in his eyes. And she knew that the Queen's threat was anything but idle. No one ever returned from the dungeon.

Taking a deep breath, she rubbed a finger over her locket. *Brave. True.* "Your Majesty," she began, "I understand the need for justice, but, please, this isn't fair."

The Queen's eyebrow arched skyward. "What did you say?" she asked.

Snow White was beginning to regret her decision to speak up. But she couldn't stop now. "The punish-ment must not exceed the crime. And I know my father would ..." She stopped, realizing what a mistake she had just made.

"Your father would what?" the Queen said, her voice oozing with anger.

The thief looked back and forth between Snow White and the Queen, his expression curious. "Your father?" he echoed.

"My father would show mercy," Snow White answered, her voice barely a whisper.

For a long moment, the room was quiet. Snow White held her breath, waiting for the storm to be unleashed. But to her shock, the Queen nodded.

"I'm sorry, my dear," she said, the picture of calm. "You're right. This thief stole from me. So I will steal from him." She turned to the Huntsman. "Remove his coat and boots and bind him to the gates to freeze. I'll make an example for all to see!"

The young man gulped. "Is the dungeon still an option?"

"Take him away," the Queen said in answer.

Snow White watched helplessly as the Huntsman began to drag the young man from the room. As the young man passed by her, his eyes met hers with a hardness that blamed her for everything. A moment later, he was pulled through the door, and it slammed behind him.

Snow White stared at the door. She had just been trying to help and she had made a mess of things. "But, Your Majesty!" she said, turning to the Queen.

The calm facade had been dropped. The Queen's eyes were dark pools of rage as she picked up her scepter, and when she spoke, her voice was icy. "I tried," she said. "I took the time to school you. To teach you my truth. Did you even listen?" She stopped. "Here." The Queen grabbed Snow White's arm and shoved the scepter into her hand.

Roughly, she spun Snow White around so she was facing one of the many mirrors in the room.

"Look at yourself," she hissed. "Isn't this what you want? Go on ... speak to your people."

Snow White didn't know what to do—or what to say. The look of hatred in the Queen's eyes had rendered her speechless. She hadn't meant to make her mad. She was just trying to do the right thing. And what had the Queen meant when she'd said she had tried to show her the Queen's truth? She had barely spoken to Snow White in the nearly ten years she had lived in the castle.

As Snow White looked up, her eyes met the Queen's in the mirror, and any last shred of confidence she had faded away. The Queen looked every inch the strong, beautiful ruler. And there was Snow White, in her rags, her hand shaking around the scepter.

"Your subjects await you, Snow White," the Queen said, torturing her with her words. "Your pies and your wise words. What will you tell them, hmm? That you've made them dessert?" Her voice was curt, dismissive, and it wounded like the sharpest blade. "You live in a world of wishes."

Her message delivered, the Queen grabbed her scepter and stormed out of the room.

Snow White stood, frozen, long after the Queen had left. While she couldn't make her body move, her mind raced over the words hurled her way. Was the Queen right? Was she only wishes and nothing more? Her father had taught her to be true to herself, to have courage and use her voice. But the first time she had been challenged to do so, she had failed. Would she ever be the girl her father wanted her to be? The girl she was meant to be? Or would she only ever be an echo of that girl?

Taking a deep breath, Snow White moved toward the door. She was tired of being a shadow inside the castle walls. She wanted to do something, be braver, more like the thief. She startled, remembering his look as he had been dragged from the room.

She had to make things right with him.

But first she had a stop to make.





Some white hadn't been past the castle's walls in years. In the beginning, right after her father left, she often went down and stood by the large castle gates, peering out at the road that led into the forest beyond. For hours she stood there, waiting for any sign of her father. She played hide-and-seek with the guards, drew pictures in the dirt with sticks, piled leaves that fell. The hours always passed pleasantly. But as the years wore on, and the Queen took more and more control, the friendly guards were replaced with cold men who had little time for her or her games. And no matter how often she looked for him, her father never came.

So Snow White stopped going to the gates.

But now she found herself back again, staring up at the large metal gate that had been lowered in front of the wooden door to the castle. The portcullis was menacing at the best of times. Now it looked even worse, as the thief's arms had been bound behind him, securing him to the metal bars while leaving his face and front open to the wind and cold. Despite the unpleasant circumstances, the thief seemed rather relaxed as Snow White approached, clutching a bag in her hand.

He lifted an eyebrow as she quickly untied him from the metal gate, nervously looking around to make sure no one was watching. As he brought his hands in front of him and began rubbing them briskly, Snow White reached into the bag and pulled out a loaf of bread. She passed it to him. "It's not much, but ..."

Her voice trailed off as their fingers met. She felt a tingle where their skin touched. "Tell me what it's like out there ..." she said.

When he began to speak, she lifted her eyes to meet his, eager to hear what he was going to say.

"You should come and find out," he said. He waggled his eyebrows and Snow White almost smiled.

But then she shook her head. "I can't...."

"I saw you give it to the Queen back there," the thief said. "You seem brave enough."

"Brave?" At the word, her hand instinctively went to her necklace. She wanted to be brave. That was why she had gone outside in the first place. But was he right? Did she seem brave? She certainly didn't feel it.

Suddenly, there was the unmistakable clanking of armor nearby. The guards! "You have to go! Run!" Snow White said, pushing the bandit onto the path that led to the woods.

He didn't wait. He began to run. But then he stopped. Turning, he looked back at her. "Thank you," he said so softly that she barely heard.

But Snow White did hear. If this stranger were caught, though, it wouldn't matter that she had helped him.

"Go!" she said.

With a nod, he turned and raced away.

Snow White watched until she was sure he was safe. Then, with her heart lighter than it had been in years, she walked back toward the castle.



The Queen stood on the balcony outside her room and watched as Snow White dreamily walked toward the wishing well. She felt a fire in her belly as she observed the girl's smile and a rush of rage when Snow White turned and looked back into the forest. There was a brightness to her face, a lightness that made her glow—all because of that thief and magical promises of a place away from here.

Fuming, the Queen stormed to the mirror. Of late, she had been asking for its reassurance more and more. Despite the fact that the King was never coming back—she was certain of it—and the villagers relied on her, and her alone, to survive, she had been feeling uneasy. While she did not dare voice her anxieties, the mirror always provided her comfort that things were as they should be.

"Magic Mirror on the wall," she began, staring at her reflection, "who is the fairest of them all?"

A voice echoed from somewhere beyond. "Famed is thy beauty, Majesty," it said. And then there was an explosion of green flame, and the phantom of the mirror appeared. It stared back at her, its pale face expressionless.

The Queen leaned in, waiting. This was when the mirror usually told her that she was the fairest of them all.

"But wait...."

Air left the queen's lungs in a hiss. Her eyes narrowed, filling with a combination of suspicion and panic.

The phantom went on. "A lovely maiden I now behold, awakened to the world. Nothing can hide her gentle grace, for I see ..."

The Queen's breathing became shallow as the words she had feared hearing for so long finally echoed through the chamber.

"She is more fair than thee ..." the phantom continued. "Lips red as the rose. Hair black as ebony. Pure as the driven—"

"Nooooo!"

The Queen's scream of rage echoed through her bedroom. There was no mistaking it: the mirror was talking about Snow White. *She* was the one whose beauty the phantom spoke of with reverence. Her big doe-like eyes and her frustratingly perfect unlined lips were what had dulled the Queen's own beauty.

Her blood boiling, the Queen snarled at the treacherous mirror and then began to pace around the room. How dare the phantom betray her? Was Snow White beautiful? Perhaps—at least in the eyes of some. But she was nothing but a simpering little girl. The Queen had more strength in her pinkie than Snow White had in her entire prim and perfect little body.

The Queen stopped as an idea came to her.

Snow White *was* perfect. And kind. And sweet. She would never be able to say no to people in need or pain. So perhaps the Queen just needed to find a way to make Snow White feel bad for her ... and then she would find her own way to get rid of the girl—once and for all.

She spun on her heels, and her long black cape rustled like a raven's wings as she turned and strode out of the room. It didn't take her long to find Snow White. The girl hadn't gotten very far. She was kneeling on the grand staircase, polishing the steps. Her head was bowed, so the Queen couldn't see her expression, but she was sure the insipid thing was smiling or humming to herself despite the chore.

"Snow White!" the Queen called, moving down the stairs. Her face was a picture of calm as she approached the girl.

"Your Majesty!" Snow White said, dropping the sponge she had been holding. "You startled me."

If only I could startle you more, the Queen thought, keeping a smile plastered to her face. "There's something I forgot to say," she told the girl as she extended her arms toward her. Snow White tilted her head.

Swallowing back the bile that rose in her throat at the physical affection, the Queen focused on driving home her "misery." Blinking back tears, she went on. "I share your pain, Snow White. We've both endured the King's absence for far too long."

"We have ..." Snow White said, nodding. She wiped a tear from her own eye.

"I've got you a little present," the Queen said, forcing her voice to stay soft, heavy with emotion.

"F-for me?" Snow White said, not bothering to hold back her shock.

The Queen nodded. "Tomorrow the gates will open for you to pick your apples. And when you return—we will make pies together!"

Snow White's hands flew to her heart. "Oh!" she breathed. "That's wonderful!"

The Queen hooked Snow White's arm with her own. "The Huntsman will escort you from the palace to the orchards in the Northern Woods."

It was the exact spot where she used to go with her parents.

"But I don't understand.... What made you change your mind?" Snow White said after a moment.

The Queen stopped. This was it: the moment she drove her plan home. Once she had Snow White's complete trust—and the Huntsman had his orders—she would be done with the girl.

"Oh, *you* did, Snow White," she said. "I've lost all my joy. But you've shown me the way, with your kindness, your ... fairness. I look at you, and I just want to be the fairest of them all." With one more smile and a gentle squeeze of Snow White's shoulder, she turned and walked away.

That, she thought as she passed a nervous maid, was the performance of a lifetime. "Get her a new dress," she said to the startled maid, pointing toward Snow White, who watched her with warm eyes. "The princess is going out."

Her order given, she went to find the Huntsman. He was the last part of the plan. And she needed him fully on board.



Long shadows lay across the castle by the time the Huntsman came to the Queen's chambers. Outside, stars began to appear in the cloudless evening sky and there was a feeling of serenity. But in her room, the mood was anything but tranquil. The Queen had death on her mind.

The Huntsman entered the chamber, bowed, and then awaited his orders.

The Queen didn't waste time. Enough had already been wasted, and with every passing minute, Snow White became a greater threat.

"Huntsman, take Snow White far into the forest," she began. She pointed a long talon-tipped finger at a map of the kingdom mounted on the nearby wall. "Find a secluded glade where she can pick apples...."

The Huntsman's eyes narrowed. "Aye, Majesty?" he said.

"And there, my faithful huntsman ... kill her."

To her surprise, the Huntsman looked shocked. What about her command surprised him?

"But, Majesty," he said, "she is just a girl."

The Queen pursed her lips, her cold eyes turning colder. She couldn't have the man feeling sympathy for the girl. She sighed. She had been hoping he would just say yes. But apparently his pesky moral values were

getting in the way. She would have to fix that, make the task a necessary evil. "And I am your Queen. It was Snow White who set the bandit free. She's plotting against me. Now tell me: are you against me, too? Are you?" "I-I ..."

"Yes or no?" the Queen said, her voice echoing off the stone walls of the chamber.

The Huntsman slowly shook his head. "No, Majesty."

She walked to her dressing table and picked up a wooden box. A delicate pattern was carved into the wood, and blue stone peeked out from underneath. It was rather lovely, save for the clasp, which was carved in the shape of a heart with a dagger through it. "Take her to the forest. Kill her. Cut out her heart. Pop it in this box."

She handed it over. As the Huntsman took the box, the Queen brushed a finger over his knuckles. "On your return, you will have anything your heart desires."

Her orders given, her vague promise offered, she presented the Huntsman with her back. She heard him turn, his boots clicking on the floor, and then the door closed. She allowed herself a small smile. After the next day, Snow White would no longer be a wrinkle in her plan to rule—beautifully—forever.





Snow White could barely contain her excitement. The sun was shining; the birds were chirping. She spun around and laughed as the skirt of her brand-new dress twirled about her. The yellow skirt and bright blue top reflected her cheery mood, and the long red cape brought out the rose in her cheeks. She had barely believed it when the seamstress arrived at her door with it first thing that morning. She had heard the Queen mutter something about getting her a new dress, but she hadn't really believed it would happen. Yet here she was, wearing the first new piece of clothing she had had in years, and going out to pick apples for the first time in as many.

It was going to be a lovely day.

Walking out the gates and down the long path toward the forest, Snow White kept her gait in check. But as soon as the soles of her red shoes touched the soft dirt of the forest floor, Snow White could no longer contain her excitement. Letting out a shout of glee, she ran into the foliage, spinning as she inhaled the rich scent of the trees and plants around her.

She spun and spun until, to her surprise, she spun right into the hard chest of the Huntsman. Immediately, she stopped as the two came face to face. But the Huntsman simply stared at her.

Together, they made their way along a winding path until they reached the orchard. Snow White smiled as she walked among the trees, their branches heavy with fruit. She could see echoes of past visits, hear her mother's laughter and the deep tenor of her father's voice. She felt a rush of sadness at the tender memories the place stirred up.

But taking a breath, she got to work. She wanted to get as many apples as possible before the rain arrived. Reaching up, she began to pluck the fruit from the low branches. She smiled as she worked, and soon her basket began to fill.

"Would you like one?" she said over her shoulder to the Huntsman as she plucked the biggest and reddest one she could find.

The Huntsman hesitated before answering. "You are very kind," he told her as he looked around the growing shadows of the North Forest. "It's getting late."

Behind her, she heard the Huntsman's heavy footsteps as he approached. His shadow covered hers, blocking the sun and causing her to shiver in the sudden chill. Without turning around, she knew what he was about to do. If she was being honest, she had sensed it from the moment they entered the woods. She'd had a feeling even before then, with the Queen's sudden emotional reversal and the impromptu gifts. A part of her, she realized now as she tried to control her breath, had always known that it would come to this—that the Queen would find a way to get rid of her.

The Huntsman was there to kill her.

Slowly, she turned around. Her eyes lifted to the Huntsman. "I know what you're going to do," she said, her voice surprisingly steady.

The Huntsman was less so. His hand shook as he drew his knife. The princess's sudden burst of bravery was not what he had expected. Snow White couldn't blame him; she hadn't expected it herself.

"Why?" Snow White asked as he lifted the knife and brought it to her throat. She didn't flinch. She simply asked again, "Why?"

For a long, tense moment, the Huntsman did not move. The knife shook as he tried to steady his hand. Snow White stared at him, watching emotions flash across his face: Anger. (At her? The Queen?) Sadness. (Because he would kill her? Or because of the man he'd become?) And finally, resolve as he lowered the knife from her throat.

He dropped the knife to the ground and grabbed Snow White by the shoulders. The bravery she had tapped into disappeared as his fingers

tightened. "You must flee into the woods," he said. His face was wild now, his eyes red. "The Queen's mad! She'll stop at nothing."

"But I can't leave the kingdom," Snow White whispered.

"She is evil, child!" the Huntsman shouted. Then, looking around nervously, he lowered his voice, as if scared the Queen would appear at any minute. "And a liar! You were never told the truth about your father."

Her father? What did the Huntsman know? What hadn't she been told? But before she could ask, the man pushed her forward, toward the path on the other side of the orchard—the path that led deeper into the woods and farther from the castle.

Tripping, Snow White nearly fell but righted herself. Turning, she silently pleaded with the Huntsman to stop this and let her return. But the look on his face sent a shiver of fear down her spine. He was truly scared.

"Go! Run, child!" he insisted, waving her toward the woods. "Never come back, or she will kill you."

But the Huntsman had said something that Snow White valued more than her life. "But what about my father?" she questioned.

The Huntsman would speak no further. He waved his hand at her as if he were trying to banish her from his sight. "Now! Go! Please! Before I change my mind. Go!"

This time Snow White didn't hesitate. She turned and took off at a run, her red cape billowing behind her. In the sky, the clouds got darker, and thunder rumbled, echoing the pounding of her heart.

Snow White ran and ran. Branches lashed at her face, and mud covered her legs as she stumbled through the woods. She felt eyes on her and picked up her pace until she was sprinting. An owl hooted and she nearly let out a scream, tripping as wings rustled overhead.

In the growing dark, every noise sounded louder. Snow White had no idea how long she had been running or in what direction she was heading. She was too scared to stop. Then she felt something grab the back of her dress and pull. Letting out a cry, she turned and saw that the end of her dress had snagged on a branch. Frantically she tugged until it came loose. But the sudden release sent her flying forward, and she slammed into a large tree trunk.

Shaking her head, Snow White began to run again. Animals called out in the night, and the moon slid behind a shadow, casting the forest into

darkness, and still she kept going. With another cry, she felt the ground disappear underneath her feet. She began to fall. Reaching out, she grasped at air, trying to find something, anything, to grab hold of. Her fingers closed around a vine, and she clung to it, stopping her descent.

But her relief lasted only a moment. With a horrific ripping sound, the vine snapped, and Snow White once again began to fall. There was a splash, and she felt intense cold as she plunged into murky water. Soaked and shocked, Snow White was dragged down by her heavy dress, and she fought toward the surface. Bubbles rose around her as she kicked desperately. But her wrists were caught in the long weeds that covered the floor of whatever body of water she had landed in.

Snow White tugged desperately at the weeds, trying to free herself. But every tug just caused the weeds to tighten around her wrists. Her lungs ached for air, and she felt her chest tightening. She wasn't going to make it. After all that, she was going to die, just like the Queen had wanted. Her eyes began to flutter closed, and then, just before she gave in to the darkness, she saw a flash of silver. Her locket! It had somehow come loose and was floating away from her—toward the surface.

With a burst of strength she didn't know she had, Snow White rallied, ripping the weeds that trapped her. Grabbing the locket, she kicked toward the surface. Breaking through the water, she gasped, gulping in air. For a moment, she stayed there, treading water and pulling air back into her oxygen-starved lungs. Then, slowly, she swam to the water's edge and lifted herself onto dry land.

Lying there, Snow White didn't know what to do. She was soaking wet. She was alone in a strange dark forest. She had no idea how to get back to the castle. And even if she'd known, she wouldn't have been able to go there, for fear of being killed by the Queen. She had nearly drowned. And if that wasn't bad enough, she realized as she sat up that there was a pair of eyes staring at her from the shadows. *Wonderful*, she thought ruefully. *Now I'm going to be attacked by a wild animal*.

But to her surprise, what emerged from the woods wasn't a creature out to harm her but rather a deer. It hovered at the forest's edge, staring at her with gentle, warm eyes. Snow White smiled at the sight. Even though she was sad and scared, the deer gave her a sense of hope. She reached into her dress, pulled out a soggy piece of bread, and offered it to the animal.

The deer walked over on its long, spindly legs and gingerly took the gift. Then, as Snow White watched, more animals appeared. A rabbit hopped to her and nuzzled her hand. Several squirrels ran in front of her and then toward a nearly hidden trail on the other side of the water. The deer looked at Snow White and then at the squirrels. Then the deer began to walk toward them.

It's like they want me to follow them, Snow White thought. Getting to her feet, she took a deep breath. Well, then, I guess I should do as they wish. Lifting her skirt, she walked after the parade of woodland creatures. To where, she didn't know. But for the first time since she had realized what the Queen wanted to do with her, she felt a glimmer of hope.

Perhaps things would be okay after all.





Despite the darkness, Snow White was no longer scared. She was surrounded by woodland creatures, all of whom seemed intent on helping her. She remembered her father talking about the magic of the woods, about animals that seemed human. Perhaps these were such creatures. They walked on all sides of her, occasionally brushing against her leg or hand, as if to say, *We're here, don't worry*. And she found that she didn't.

Instead, she gazed around the woods curiously. The sky was brightening with the approaching dawn, the soft light illuminating the path at her feet. The ground was tamped down, as if the path had frequent use. But by whom? Snow White wondered. The animals? Or something—or someone—else? Her thoughts drifted to the young man she had saved. The thief had said he lived in the forest, hadn't he? Did he walk this path? Was he nearby? Perhaps he could help her. He certainly didn't seem to care for the Oueen.

She was shaken from her reverie by the gentle nudge of one of the deer. Looking up, she saw that they had entered a clearing. And there, in the middle, was a cottage. The dawn light turned it a beautiful warm red, making it appear welcoming. Snow White almost clapped her hands in glee. Finally! Perhaps whoever lived there would allow her to rest for a bit.

Several of the animals pushed past her and nudged the door open. Snow White didn't hesitate. Eager for warmth and a place to sit, she entered the cottage. She had to duck to go through the rather low door. When she stepped inside, closing the door behind her, she took a quick breath. The space looked like a typical cottage—only miniature. And messy. Very, very messy. Dishes were piled high in the sink. Cobwebs hung from the rafters, and several of the chairs around the low table were knocked over. Everything—from the cabinets to the chairs to the sink—appeared to have been carved by hand from wood. Images of flowers and vines painted on the walls ran up onto the ceiling. It almost felt like being in an indoor garden.

"Hello?" Snow White called out tentatively. "Is there anybody here ...?"

She was met with silence. But then a sudden gust of wind blasted the front door open. The sound startled Snow White, and without waiting for an answer, she rushed over, slammed the door, and raced up the stairs. Her heart was pounding as she flung herself into the attic space.

Light from a window caught on the dust motes Snow White's frantic entrance had kicked up. Like the room below, this one was messy—and clearly heavily used. The walls slanted down on either side, and rough wood floors covered the entire area. The ceiling was thatched. And in the middle of the space stood seven small beds—each with a different name written on the footboard.

Walking to the nearest one, Snow White heard the wind tapping at the windows and shivered. She had had a long night. A long day, too. She was tired and cold. She just needed a quick rest and then she would figure out what to do. She lowered herself into the bed and pulled the covers over her head. Then, clutching her locket in her hand, she quickly fell asleep.



Doc was tired. He and his friends had left the cottage before dawn to get to the caves and begin their work. For hours, they had dug and collected gems from the mine. The beautiful gems were easy to find—for them. They simply put a hand on the rocky surface and the gems began to glow, calling

to the miners to free them. So that was what they did, day after day, week after week. They loved their work—though the constant time together made them more family than friends. And that meant that, on occasion, they argued and teased each other. Some of them, like Happy, didn't mind the teasing. He really was happy most of the time. Others, like Grumpy, got annoyed quickly and spent as much time complaining as they did digging. But for the most part, they were a happy group who went to work each day singing and went home each evening still singing.

Now, as Doc led the others back to the cottage, he wondered what they would make for dinner—and if Sleepy would make it through the door before falling asleep for the night. He was fairly certain Sneezy would have a sneezing fit as soon as they got into the clearing and Grumpy would say something that made Bashful blush and Dopey look confused. And Happy would just keep singing and smiling.

Doc smiled himself. Yes, he was tired. But he loved this little group and the routine of their life. It was simple. Nothing changed. Nothing happened. And he liked it quite fine. Change had never been his strong suit.

They arrived at the cottage, and their song ended as Doc pushed open the door. One by one, they filed in, yawning and tossing their shoes and jackets in random spots. Doc lit a candle and handed it to Sleepy, who led the way, quite sleepily, up the stairs. Everyone was too tired that night to bother with dinner.

One by one, they grabbed sleeping caps and replaced their dirty clothes with red one-piece pajamas hanging from hooks on the wall outside their room.

Ready for bed, they headed toward their room. Apparently, they weren't going fast enough for Grumpy's taste, and he let out a grunt.

"It's a ... It's a ... "Sleepy stammered, pointing into the room. The others couldn't see what he was talking about. Before he could tell them, he passed out, slumping into Happy's arms.

Happy smiled. "He did it again," he said.

Doc nodded. "Narcoleptic cataplexy," he observed. Sleepy had a tendency to fall asleep suddenly when he was worried. Doc had tried to work with him on the reaction, but clearly, it wasn't helping.

"I thought he just—achoo!—fell asleep when he was worried," Sneezy said.

"Worried about what? What's there to be worried about?" Happy asked.

Doc shrugged. He wasn't sure. But then everyone saw Dopey. He had walked past the sleeping Sleepy and entered the room. He was pointing at something. The others crowded in and followed his finger. They all gasped as they saw the sheets on one of the beds moving.

The others stared at the bed. Then they looked at Sleepy. Then at Grumpy. Then, finally, everyone turned to Doc. He sighed. He knew what they wanted him to do. Moving toward the bed, he reached out an arm. His fingers were just about to grab the sheet when suddenly the sheet stretched and a loud groan filled the room.

Doc turned on his heel and headed out of the room. The others followed. But before Dopey could get out, Grumpy slammed the door, trapping Dopey inside—with a ghost!



Frantic, Dopey pulled at the door, trying to open it. But all he managed to do was rip the knob right off. He fell backward, scrambling on his feet as he neared the bed and the moving sheet. He inched back to the door and leaned against it so that his ear was next to the keyhole.

"How big is it?" he heard one of them say. The others added advice to the mix, warning him not to look it in the eyes or touch it. Dopey sat silently, staring at the bed.

Bashful was the one to ask the question that was on everyone's mind. "Is it floating?"

The sheet had stopped moving and no more sounds came from underneath it. On tiptoe, Dopey nervously approached the bed. He stopped, his fingers hovering over the sheet. Then, before he could talk himself out of it, he gingerly pulled the sheet off the bed.

Dopey's eyes widened as he took in the beautiful girl sleeping peacefully. Her dark hair lay across the pillow, framing her face. He thought she looked like an angel. He stepped closer, wanting a better look.

And then the girl's eyes popped open! Spotting Dopey staring at her, she did what anyone would do if startled awake in such a manner. She screamed—loudly!

Dopey opened his mouth wide. But no sound came out. He never made a sound. But it was easy to see he would be screaming if he could.

The girl screamed again.

Dopey silently followed suit.

Outside, the miners, not sure what was going on but scared nonetheless, began to scream, too. Soon the entire cottage was filled with the shrieks of six miners and a girl.

Dopey took off, ducking into the shadows of the eaves. The girl's gaze followed him, and he watched with a combination of curiosity and fear as she stood up and began to move toward him. He edged along the walls, trying to keep his distance from her. But she was bigger than he was, and soon enough, she caught up to him.

Crouching down, she looked at him. He had closed his eyes but now opened one cautiously. The girl was gazing at him kindly. He opened the other eye.

"Don't be afraid," she said, her voice sweet and melodic. "It's all right." Dopey shook his head.

She sounded sincere. And she was looking at him with such wide eyes. Slowly, he stepped closer. The girl smiled and gently touched a finger to his cheek. "I only wanted to meet you," she said. "What's your name?"

Dopey blushed from the tips of his ears to his toes. Then, before he could stop himself, he did a little kick. It was what he did when he was pleased with something. And right then he was quite pleased to have been the first to meet their guest.

"Don't you speak?" she asked softly.

Just then, the door shook and burst open, and the six others fell into the room. They had grabbed their pickaxes and were brandishing them above their heads. It would have been a lot scarier if they hadn't also been wearing their red sleeping caps.

"Wait! Please!" the girl said as she backed up. Her voice started to tremble, and Dopey thought he saw a tear in her eye. "I didn't mean any harm...."

As she apologized, the seven of them stared at her. Then they all began to talk, one after another.

"Why ..." Doc began.

"It's a human!" Bashful said, surprisingly unbashful for once.

The girl looked back and forth between them all. Then she smiled. "Well, yes," she said. "What did you think I was?"

Dopey smiled. If he talked, he might have teased them for being scaredy-cats. Instead, he let them explain—sort of.

"Nothing," Sneezy said at the same time Grumpy crossed his arms and huffed, "Ghost."

The girl let out a laugh, and just like that, the tension lifted. Moving forward, the seven of them surrounded her, throwing questions at her left and right. "Where did you come from?" "Do you feel well?" "Are you hungry?"

As they fell over one another to talk to the girl, Dopey saw that Grumpy was standing back, frowning. "Why's everyone being so cordial?" he finally asked. "The only human things who come into the forest anymore are bandits who claim to fight in the King's name." He narrowed his eyes and stuck out his chin at the girl.

"What?" she asked, her eyes widening in surprise.

"You're in trouble with the law, aren't ya?" Grumpy continued as he walked closer toward their guest.

To Dopey's surprise, the question seemed to upset the girl. She glanced around nervously and took a few steps toward the door. "I'd better go," she said.

"Told ya!" Grumpy said.

"Wait, wait, wait. Hold on ..." Doc interrupted.

"Let her leave," Grumpy said, always eager to have the last word.

Dopey and Doc shot their friend a look. That wasn't how they treated guests—even human ones. And sending her away now was wrong.

"At least tell us who you are," Sleepy said, yawning loudly.

"Yeah," Happy agreed as he nodded enthusiastically.

The girl looked at each of the seven. She appeared to be trying to decide if she could trust them. Her gaze lingered on Grumpy before returning to Dopey. He smiled encouragingly.

She took a deep breath. "My name is Snow White," she said. And then she turned and moved toward the door.

The others stared, their mouths hanging open. Snow White? The princess? No one had heard from or seen her in years. Not since her father

. . .

"Snow White?!" questioned Doc.

"The princess?" asked Bashful as Grumpy began to pace around the small room.

Dopey had to admit Grumpy wasn't wrong to be acting nervous. Humans rarely came to the forest. And lately, when they had, it hadn't been for any good reason. At one time, the seven of them and other magical creatures had welcomed humans with open arms. But that was before. Now here was a human—the princess, no less. The princess who lived in the castle. And since the Queen had arrived, not one good thing had come out of the place.

"I say it's a trap!" Grumpy said.

"But she needs our help," Doc said. Dopey nodded in agreement. He had seen the flash of fear in Snow White's eyes. She was scared. And alone.

Behind them, they heard footsteps on the stairs. Turning, they saw the object of their conversation was no longer there.

Snow White was leaving.





Snow White bit back the sob that threatened to escape her throat. She didn't want to leave. She had nowhere to go. But she couldn't stay and risk putting these kind strangers in danger.

She raced down the stairs and moved through the small cottage, heading for the door. She had to get out of there, put as much distance as she could between herself and the castle. Hearing the thuds of seven pairs of feet on the stairs behind her, she picked up her pace. She was just at the door when one of them spoke.

"Wait!" the one with the spectacles and gray beard said. "Where are you going?"

"As far away from the castle as possible." Snow White paused, unsure how honest to be. Clearly, these seven creatures—for that was what they had to be, some sort of magical beings that lived in the forest—knew the Queen was dangerous. Deciding it wouldn't hurt to tell them, she swallowed. "The truth is that the Queen tried to kill me. And now I can't go back."

There was silence as her words sunk in. The seven glanced at one another. For a long moment, no one spoke.

But then, to her surprise, the others began to shake their heads. The one with glasses, who looked a bit like a teacher, asked gently, "She *really* tried

to kill you?"

Snow White's eyes filled with tears as she nodded. For the first time since the Huntsman had pulled his knife in the orchard, the reality of her situation slammed into her. She had lost her father and mother. Life in the castle had been awful since then. But it had been her home. And it wasn't anymore. She was alone—and unloved.

"Well, that's terrible," the grumpy one said. Snow White wiped away a tear. "It's also exactly why you have to leave."

She didn't blame him. She was a liability.

"But she's so ... so ... sweet. And nice," the one with the permanent blush stammered.

"And dangerous!" the grumpy one protested.

"But nice dangerous," said the one with what looked like a permanent smile on his face.

"Dangerous is dangerous!" the gruff one said.

"It's the Queen who's dangerous," Snow White said. Looking around at the others, she saw that they were gazing at her with kindness, and their warmth had given her the strength to speak up.

But as quickly as the wave of conviction washed over her, it drew back. Her hand went to her throat, and she ran her fingers over the words etched on the back of her locket. She tried to gain confidence from the words, but instead, she felt only sadness.

Feeling something pressing against her leg, Snow White looked down to see the gentle one who had first found her leaning against her. He didn't speak, but his kindness made her feel momentarily better. Still, she knew she had to go. Once more, she turned to the door, only to be stopped by the voice of the one who appeared to be the oldest.

"You should stay here until you figure out where you're going to go," he said. Around him, the others were nodding.

Snow White cocked her head. She hadn't heard any such discussion.

"What?" the grumpy one shouted, saying out loud what Snow White was thinking.

The happy one nodded and said with a smile, "I think that's a wonderful idea."

"Now hold on! A human shows up in this cottage for the first time in two hundred seventy-five years and you ask her to stay?" the loud one said. Snow White's eyes widened. She had assumed they were magical, but ... "Did he say ... two hundred seventy-five years?"

The oldest nodded. "Two hundred seventy-four, to be precise. We're as old as the trees."

A smile began to tug at Snow White's lips. "My parents always said this forest was a magical place!" She had loved hearing her mother's stories of the creatures that lived beyond the castle: how they lived in peace with the forest, how they were as different and wondrous as the plants that filled their garden. And now here she was—among them!

The grumpy one did not seem as thrilled. "I've always said that humans cause nothing but trouble."

Snow White looked at him. His frown was so intense his whole face seemed to drop. She wanted to reassure him that she was no trouble at all, but she realized she couldn't go on talking to them without knowing what to call them. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I don't know your name."

Jumping in, the one with the glasses waved to the others, happy to act as the host. "Allow me to introduce—in alphabetical order—Bashful, Dopey, Grumpy"—Snow White bit the inside of her cheek; she had figured as much—"Happy, Sleepy, and Sneezy. And I'm Doc."

Snow White smiled at each of them. Their names clearly matched their personalities. It was quite original, just like them.

"You said we were doing reverse alphabetical order this time," Sneezy said. His nose looked red, and his eyes were watery.

Bashful blushed as he answered, "That was *last* time."

In the short time she had known them, Snow White assumed that the group members were like brothers—quick to banter or tease. To stop a squabble between the two, she took a breath and said, "So, in reverse order ... Sneezy, Sleepy, Happy, Grumpy, Dopey, Doc, Bashful." The names came out in a rush.

Their mouths dropped open. "How did she do that?" Bashful said at the same time Doc said, "Well, I'll be!"

Snow White shook her head but smiled. "My father taught me it's important to remember a name," she explained.

It was funny: she had spoken of her father more in her brief time in the cottage than she had in all her years of living with the Queen. It was nice to

remember the good things he had done, the lessons he had taught her—before he had disappeared.

Shaking off the negative thought, she focused on these strangers. They had been there for so long. She had to wonder ... "What exactly are you doing out here in the forest?"

The seven of them glanced at one another as though unsure how to answer. She supposed that because they had been there for such a long time, explaining themselves might not be something they did often—or at all.

Finally, Doc spoke up. "Um, well, it's our job to mine the mines...."

"You'd be amazed at what you can find," Bashful said.

Sneezy sneezed. "Sparkling rocks of every kind!"

Subconsciously, Snow White realized they were making a sort of song from their answers. It was clear from the way they finished each other's sentences and riffed off each other's lines that they had been together a long time.

Happy went on. "A place where magic still abides ..."

"Not for long if she resides!" Grumpy snapped.

Sleepy yawned. "Look at the time...." He drifted off to sleep, right where he was standing.

Sleepy was right. It was getting late. The sun had long since set, and despite her nap, Snow White was feeling tired herself. Still, she hadn't been fully invited ... yet.

"The important thing is," Happy said, smiling up at her, "Snow White would be out of harm's way at our address. Right, fellas?"

The others nodded. "Definitely," one said.

"Don't leave," said another.

"Way out of harm's way."

"Objection."

Grumpy's voice broke over the murmurs of assent. "Noted," Doc informed him before turning to Snow White, to whom he whispered, "Just ignore him."

Snow White sighed. As much as she would like to stay, she wouldn't unless all of them wanted her to be their guest. She opened the door and stepped out into the night. She shivered in the sudden chill and jumped at the sound of thunder rumbling in the distance. Her heart hammering, she looked back at the door. They were watching her, waiting.

True, Grumpy wasn't exactly thrilled to have her company. But he was only one of seven. He was outvoted.

When she walked back inside, Dopey did a happy little kick. "Maybe I'll stay just for the night," she said.

Grumpy looked at her, then at the others. He sighed. "One night. Then she leaves!" he said, stomping toward the stairs.

"You'll be safe from the Queen here," Doc informed her.

Snow White allowed herself a smile. She wasn't going to be able to stay there forever. And the Queen was likely looking for her even at that very moment. But for one night, she could sleep, feeling safe and protected in a cozy cottage in the middle of the magical forest.



At the same moment, inside her chambers, the Queen was, in fact, not concerned about Snow White's whereabouts. The Huntsman had done as ordered and returned that evening with the box in hand. Inside, nestled in velvet, was Snow White's heart. That was what he had told her.

So the Queen had gone to her chambers with a smile—or an approximation of one, as the Queen rarely truly smiled—and placed the box on a shelf. Outside, a full moon shone through the window, casting a pale white glow over everything.

Confident that her status as the fairest in the land had been restored, the Queen approached her mirror.

"Magic Mirror on the wall," she said, chanting the familiar words, "who is the fairest one of all?"

Eager for the phantom's reassurance, she waited for him to appear. The green smoke faded, revealing his pale face.

"Lost inside the wild, far beyond the castle wall ..."

The Queen hissed. What was this? These were not the words she had expected.

The phantom went on. "The princess has taken flight. And the world at last begins to see: the fairest is Snow White."

As the queen stared at the mirror, her expression turned to stone. "No!" she exclaimed.

"I am only bound by what is true.... The fairest lives—she is not you," the phantom finished.

How could this be? The Huntsman had said she had been taken care of! He had given the Queen the box—with Snow White's heart! Although ... She rushed to the shelf, grabbed the box, and opened it with shaking fingers. She let out a shout as she saw what lay on the velvet. It was not a heart, but a shiny red apple.

Rage blinded her, and she fought the urge to hurl the box across her chambers. Instead, she inhaled deeply and, bringing her rage from a boil to a simmer, slowly closed the box.

So the Huntsman had lied to her. He had protected that simpering little princess and let her go free.

He had made a grave mistake. She was the Queen, and in the game of life, all was fair when you wore the crown. She would make him pay for his treachery. But first she needed to find him.

She stormed out of her chambers and made her way to the throne room, barking orders at her soldiers to find the Huntsman and bring him to her.



The Queen didn't have to wait long. She had barely taken a seat on her throne when the doors flew open and two soldiers appeared. The Huntsman hung between them, his arms firmly held in their strong hands as they dragged him toward the Queen.

The Queen arched an eyebrow as the Huntsman was thrown at her feet. He at least had the decency to keep his eyes on the floor.

"You dare to disobey me?" she said after a long moment.

"I don't deserve mercy," the Huntsman said. "But if there's a drop of it in your heart, I beseech you: show it to her."

The Queen let out a cold laugh. Mercy? To Snow White? Did the Huntsman truly believe she needed—or cared for—his advice? She had learned over the years exactly where nice got you—to the bottom of the pile. Nice girls let others walk all over them. And she had no intention of being walked on. No. She had ambition. She had power. And she had no plans to end anywhere but on the top.

Grabbing the dagger from the Huntsman's belt, she nodded to the soldiers.

She watched as the Huntsman was dragged away. When the throne room doors had shut behind him, she lifted a hand mirror and gazed into it. Her brown eyes looked back, not showing a hint of the emotions roiling through her. She had heard people say it all her life: that true beauty lay within. When they cowered in fear even while they stared, she knew that people thought that about her. But she had never believed them. She didn't care for their sayings. She knew that beauty came from power.

It was time to remind everyone just how beautiful she was.

She got to her feet and returned to her chambers. From her wardrobe, she pulled out a new dress. It was dark as night but sparkled with diamonds and other jewels. The high collar highlighted her sharp cheekbones, and the matching cape sparkled as she walked. On her head she placed her crown. When she was done, she swept out of her rooms. Servants gasped as she passed, a picture of power in her new dress. As she made her way down the grand staircase and into the entry of the castle, she called to her handmaidens, soldiers, and servants to gather. When they were all in attendance, she gestured to the Captain of the Guard.

He stepped forward and kneeled in front of her.

"I am in need of a new lieutenant," she said. "Are you my man?"

The guard didn't dare hesitate. The look in the Queen's eyes made it clear there was only one answer. He bowed.

"Snow White is a traitor to her kingdom," the Queen said. She was done pretending to care for that sniveling little thing. Snow White had caused far too much trouble already. "Search the forest. And don't come back without her!"

With the Queen's orders given, the Captain of the Guard hurried off, and the rest of the soldiers followed.

The Queen smiled. It was only a matter of time before Snow White would be out of her hair—once and for all.





"t's not fair!"

Grumpy's voice echoed through the cottage. Outside, the sun was shining and birds chirped cheerfully. But Grumpy was anything but cheery. They had agreed to let Snow White stay the night. But now it was day, and she was still there, sleeping upstairs while the seven milled about the kitchen.

He went on, ignoring the looks of the others, who clearly didn't mind Snow White's presence. "It's the morning and she's still here. They'll come looking for her, and when they find her ..." Grumpy drew a finger across his throat. His eyes landed on Dopey, who was staring at him in horror. "What do you have to say about that? Nothing, that's what!"

They heard Snow White moving about the room upstairs. Her soft voice drifted down the stairway as she mumbled something to herself.

Happy listened for a moment and then turned to his friend. "Now, Grumpy," he said, "you know Dopey won't talk."

It was true. Dopey hadn't spoken in a long time—not since they had known him, at least. Still, it wasn't kind to pick on him. Usually, Grumpy managed to keep his anger in check toward him, but that day he was obviously grumpier than usual.

Happy stepped forward, hoping to defuse the situation and stop a fight before it started. He knew what happened once they got going. It was one of the disadvantages of living and working together. They could be a bit hard on one another. Normally, he might have let it run its course, but that day was different. They had company. And at that moment, said company was watching the seven of them with interest. "Guys!" he said, holding up his hands. "Let's all just try to be friends."

Grumpy, his knickers all in a twist, grabbed a loaf of bread. He threw the bread toward Sneezy. At the last moment, Sneezy ducked, and the bread smacked into Sleepy's face.

Yawning but clearly annoyed, Sleepy grabbed an egg and hurled it at Grumpy.

In answer, a piece of food was thrown back at him. Sighing, he picked up a hunk of cheese and threw it back. Soon the others—save Dopey and Doc—were in the midst of a full-blown food fight. Food of all shapes and sizes flew back and forth across the kitchen, landing on everyone and surfaces and quickly making the place even messier than it had been before.

Over the ruckus, Grumpy set his eyes on Happy and tackled him. The two rolled under the kitchen table, crushing bits of food left and right as they fought.

On top of the table, Sneezy and Bashful fenced with baguettes. In the meantime, Dopey chased a firefly around the room while Doc, the calm in the midst of chaos, sat trying to eat his soup.

With a swish and a thrust of his baguette, Sneezy parried and advanced, unfortunately stepping on the foot of Sleepy—who awoke with a yell.

Snow White, who was still upstairs, paused as the sounds of the commotion continued to escalate.

As the others succumbed to a brawl, Dopey slipped out through the front door, his head hung low.



Snow White had never seen anything like the food fight in the kitchen. An only child, she had never been in a squabble with a sibling, nor had she ever said mean words in a heated moment. Watching the seven of them snap

back and forth at each other, she didn't know what to do. It didn't seem right to step in, but she didn't want to sit idly by as they destroyed the cottage and hurt each other.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Dopey untangle himself from the pile and head out the door. Caught up in the fight, the others didn't notice. Moving past the group, Snow White followed Dopey outside.

She found Dopey sitting on the front steps with a sad expression on his face. "Are you all right?" she asked softly.

In answer, his head drooped farther, and he kicked at a leaf.

"Makes you want to run and hide," Snow White said softly. She had heard a bit of the earlier part of the conversation and figured it wasn't the first time Grumpy had picked on Dopey.

Dopey nodded. When his eyes rose to meet hers, their expressive depths showed her how hopeless he felt.

She pursed her lips and thought for a moment. Dopey was an agreeable guy, and she didn't like to see him upset. What would her father have said to her if someone had picked on her? Snow White leaned closer.

Snow White smiled. Even though she could speak, she hadn't talked to anyone—really talked to anyone—in a long time. Dopey looked like he was the youngest of the seven. At some point, had he realized it was easier to just be quiet than to try to be heard—like her? It made her sad for a moment to realize all they might have missed out on. But then she remembered the locket. Be brave. Be true. She could help Dopey. And maybe, along the way, she would help herself, too. "Are you afraid to speak?" she asked.

Dopey looked down again.

"Well," she said, and took a deep breath, "maybe we can start with something small. When I was a little girl, my mother taught me how to whistle." She paused as she heard something crash to the ground inside the cottage. She went on. "So even when I'm too afraid to speak, I whistle. Because when you whistle ... it's your heart speaking." Slowly she reached out and put her palm over Dopey's heart. His eyes widened.

Tilting her head, she listened as the others yelled back and forth at one another, oblivious that both she and Dopey were no longer inside. Speaking as much to them as to Dopey, she added, "And that voice—the one that's hidden in your heart—can be heard." The other six of them had no problem yelling at one another, but were any of them truly speaking? She was quite

certain none of them were being listened to. Maybe this would help. Pursing her lips again, she blew a happy little tune.

She nodded at Dopey. "See? Now you try."

Scrunching his eyes in concentration, he put his lips together and blew. Nothing but air came out.

"Try it again," Snow White said gently.

Once again, he tried. And once again, the only sound that came out of his mouth was the hiss of air.

Snow White watched and thought. A vague memory of standing by the well with her mother floated through her mind. Snow White had been so young. And she had wanted desperately to show her mother she could whistle. She had tried and tried, harder and harder.... That was it! She knew what was wrong. "Just enough to make a candle flicker, not go out," she told him.

Nodding, Dopey took another breath, and then, very gently, he began to blow. The sound was faint at first, but it grew louder. Soon a clear whistle echoed through the clearing.

"You did it!" Snow White said, clapping her hands happily. "I knew you could!"

Dopey stared at her, his cheeks red and his eyes bright. He didn't have to say a word. Snow White knew exactly what he was thinking. He had made a sound! It was the small step Snow White had mentioned, and the effect was huge.

Turning to the cottage, Snow White inhaled and pushed back her shoulders. "Come on!" she said, grabbing Dopey's hand and striding toward the door. She had helped Dopey. Now it was time to help the others—before they destroyed themselves and their home.





Snow White held back a gasp when she and Dopey entered the cottage. The entire place was in shambles. Food covered the floor, walls, and furniture. Plates lay broken on the ground, and cutlery that had been thrown about was still quivering in the wooden walls. Stools were overturned, paintings were askew, and the kerfuffle had kicked up dust and dirt, making the air thick.

In the middle of it all, oblivious to their surroundings, the others continued to fight. They had ceased fighting one-on-one and had somehow managed to maneuver themselves into a group headlock of sorts.

Dragging her eyes from the chaotic scene, Snow White glanced at Dopey. He was watching with a mixture of fear and resignation. He had seen this all before. Sensing Snow White's gaze on him, he looked up at her. She pursed her lips and nodded toward the others as if to say, *Go ahead. You can do it.*

Dopey hesitated as if unsure. Snow White gave him another encouraging nod. She knew that this behavior was nothing new. The seven of them clearly fought a lot. But that didn't mean they had to continue. Holding her own breath, she watched as Dopey began to whistle. It was soft at first, but as his confidence grew, so did the cheery sound. It bounced off

the walls and finally penetrated the group headlock. Their feet began to slow. Their hands stopped their pulling and pushing.

Finally, wrenching himself free of the tussle, Happy looked around. "What's that divine and ravishing noise?" he asked.

Next Sneezy's head popped out. Snow White smiled, keeping her expression neutral. She couldn't let them know that this was *exactly* the reaction she had been hoping to get from them.

One by one the others freed themselves from the tangle and cocked their heads, listening to the melody.

"It's Dopey!" said Bashful as he pulled his own head free and spotted his younger friend standing by Snow White.

"I can't believe it!" said Sleepy.

Even Grumpy stopped his shenanigans. But when he heard it was Dopey, he frowned. "It's a trick," he said.

But Snow White shook her head as she put a comforting hand on Dopey's back. "It's not a trick."

Shooting Grumpy a look, Doc moved closer to Dopey and leaned in, observing him as if he were a specimen. "How are you doing that?" he asked curiously.

Dopey, unused to the attention but liking it nonetheless, trilled a few notes that sounded an awful lot like "I don't know."

Jumping in, Snow White quickly gave them all a whistling lesson. "Lips together," she said. "Place your tongue behind your teeth, and whistle...."

"Oh, I can do that. That's ea-ea-ea"—Sneezy let out a sneeze—"easy!"

But as he started to whistle, another whistled louder, trying to prove he was the better whistler. Snow White watched in horror as the room fell back into chaos, with the seven all trying to out-whistle one another. When they realized they couldn't do that, fists once more began to fly.

Watching as the group headlock began to re-form, Snow White shook her head. They were being ridiculous! She brought her fingers to her lips, took a deep breath, and then blew. An earsplitting sound pierced the air, stopping everyone in their tracks.

"Look at you," Snow White said when she had their attention. She shook her head. The seven glanced at one another and then sheepishly down at the ground. "Is this normal or something special you do among friends?"

"We're not friends!" Grumpy shouted, bringing it back to the very issue that had started the fight—sort of.

Snow White sighed. On a wall, a clock ticked and then fell to the floor with a crash. "Two hundred seventy-five years is a long time to argue."

"Two hundred seventy-four!" Doc corrected her.

"Leave me out of it!" Grumpy said, stepping away from the others and crossing his arms over his chest. "I'm the only sensible one here!"

Snow White nodded. "Hmm. And you feel like they're not listening to sense?"

"Correct!" Grumpy said. Then he looked annoyed at having agreed with Snow White and frowned deeper.

"I take your point, Mr. Grumpy," Snow White said.

"You—wait, what?" Grumpy responded.

Holding back a smile as Grumpy tried to make sense of that, Snow White turned to the others and said, "It seems to me that everyone here could do a much better job of listening to one another."

With perfect timing, an old clock fell off the wall and landed on a heap of debris on the ground.

Snow White shook her head as she looked around at the disarray of the room. Following her lead, Dopey looked, too, and slowly let out a whistle of what seemed like dismay.

She smiled broadly at her friend and nodded her head. "I was thinking the same thing...."

Snow White then turned and opened the broom closet. She had tried one way of getting them to stop fighting and work together, and it had failed. But she remembered them saying they mined together. They couldn't possibly spend all their time in the mines fighting, or else they would never get anything done. So perhaps giving them a common goal was the way to make a dent in this prickly situation. It couldn't hurt to try. And, she thought as she looked through the various odds and ends crammed into the closet, at the very least it might result in a tidier cottage.

She pulled out a kite and then a bowling ball and handed them to Grumpy. He looked down and shook his head. He began to grumble about not having time for bowling, but Snow White ignored him and kept pulling other items out of the closet. She handed a broom to Happy, a chimney

brush to Sneezy, and a feather duster to Grumpy. She slipped a sponge into Sleepy's hands—safest option, she figured—and then looked at the others.

She gestured at the various cleaning supplies as she explained what each of them was to do. There were dishes to clean, a room to be tidied, and cobwebs to be cleared. And that was just the beginning. When she was done giving them their chores, they stared at her, dumbfounded.

She tilted her head. Had not one of them, in the 275—no, 274—years they had lived there, ever told another to clean? No wonder the place was such a mess. Sensing a not-too-pleasant undercurrent, Snow White decided to put them each in a different location. She marched them to their stations one by one: Sleepy in the kitchen, Sneezy in front of the chimney, Doc at the laundry tub. And as she did so, she whistled, ignoring the groans and complaints and the angry looks from Grumpy.

Hearing a whistle behind her, she turned and smiled when she saw Dopey following her, whistling the same tune. As the others began to work, Snow White floated among the stations, smiling and whistling. Her enthusiasm was contagious, and the others soon found themselves scrubbing and brushing and sweeping in time to the music, joining in. Outside, animals peered through the windows, curious to see what was happening in the cottage, which was usually so quiet. And up in the rafters, mice looked down, their tails whipping back and forth, brushing away cobwebs and dust.

All the while, Snow White kept moving. She picked up piles of clothes and gave them to Doc. She swept the broom out of Happy's hands and danced around him for a moment before returning it to him. Catching Grumpy and Bashful bickering over a scrub brush, she found an extra and handed it to them before slipping away to help Sneezy with the chimney. Bit by bit, surface by surface, the cottage became cleaner. But even with eight of them working, there was too much to do. Hundreds of years of dirt was a lot to clean.

Turning to the window, Snow White smiled. It was a lot to clean, but they were in a magical forest, full of magical creatures and wonderful woodland friends who she was quite certain would be happy to lend a hand —or a paw. She let out a happy little trill, and her smile widened as the same animals who had led her to the cottage the night before flooded through the door.

Soon Doc was hanging laundry on a helpful deer's antlers while nearby a woodpecker helped nail a table leg back into place. Squirrels used their bushy tails to wipe away dust, and a few chipmunks hopped on scrub brushes to help polish the floor.

Stepping back, Snow White looked on as the seven and the animals worked in harmony. There was no fighting, no bickering. Instead, they whistled and sang, complimenting each other as they went. And bit by bit, the messy cottage was transformed. Now the counters gleamed, the floor shone, the paintings hung straight, and the scent of fresh laundry filled the air.

As the group took in the results, they smiled.

"I forgot getting along could be so much fun," Happy said, his smile, not surprisingly, the biggest of all.

The others nodded in agreement. Pointing at the kitchen, with the plates all put away and the cutlery nestled in the right drawers, Sneezy said, "I forgot we had an oven in here!" He sneezed.

Snow White laughed. Her plan had worked! She had reminded her hosts that they were a team—a good one, at that—not just in the mines, but in the cottage as well. Not only did the air smell cleaner, it felt lighter, as if the collective weight of seven small sets of shoulders had been lifted. "When I was a little girl," she said softly, "every day was like this."

"Every day?" Happy said.

Snow White nodded. "Every day." Her smile faltered as she added, "When my father was here." Her vision blurred as tears pricked at her eyes. Remembering the good times was both wonderful and sad. There, in the middle of the cottage, she felt a peace she hadn't felt in a long time. These strangers might not have welcomed her with open arms, but they had shown her more kindness in the past day than she had received in years from the Oueen.

Shaking her head to clear away the thoughts, she stood up straighter. She had brought them together. Clearly, she could accomplish anything if she put her mind to it. It was time she found a way back to her own happiness.

"The Huntsman said the Queen lied about my father. She lied about everything. What if he's still alive?" It was the first time she had dared utter the hope out loud. She knew how desperate it might sound. But if there was

any chance—any chance at all—that he was out there, she had to try to find him. And she had a good idea of where to start. Squaring her shoulders, she continued. "I have to find him. You said there were bandits in the forest who claim to fight in the King's name?"

Grumpy looked even less pleased than usual. "Human criminals," he said, correcting her. "Those rebels are nothing but thieves."

"They're actually a band of erstwhile actors and performers whose sustenance was made unstable by the Queen's greedy economic policies, which forced them into a liminal space where ethics and motive are ill-defined," Doc said, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

Snow White wasn't concerned with semantics. If they fought for the King, they fought for her. Her mind flashed back to the young man she had met. He could have hurt her when she freed him. But he hadn't. And he had seemed interested in who she was, so perhaps he knew more than he had let on. "Where are they?" she asked. "If they know the truth about my father, I need to find them."

Doc shook his head. "Oh, no. I advise against it," he said. "It's too dangerous."

"He's right! Stay with me!" Bashful said, turning bright red as he realized his slip. "I mean us!"

"Yes ... you barely got away from the Queen the la-la-la"—Sneezy let out a huge sneeze—"last time!"

Snow White couldn't help smiling. They might not all have liked her in the beginning, but they certainly had warmed to her. And she had warmed to them. She didn't want to upset them, and she understood their worry, but she had spent the past eight years waiting for her father to come to her. She was done waiting.

"Gesundheit," she told him. "This is what I have to do," she said. "Besides, Grumpy's right. The longer I stay with you, the more danger I put you in."

Grumpy nodded, pointing to the door. "At last! Goodbye!"

"GRUMPY!" Happy protested, appalled at the manners of the miner in question.

But his words didn't bother Snow White. She knew that was all they were. "It's time for me to stop hiding. Thank you all for showing me such kindness." She met each of their gazes one by one and smiled.

"Almost all ..." Grumpy grumbled.

"Even you, Grumpy. Now, can you point me in the right direction?" Simultaneously, seven fingers lifted and pointed—in seven different directions.

Before Snow White could ask for clarification, a clock on the wall began to chime frantically. In all the hubbub of the morning, the miners had completely forgotten: they had to get to work!

Scrambling into their work clothes and donning their boots, they waved goodbye to Snow White and marched out the door. She watched them whistling as they went, until they disappeared into the thick trees.

She sighed. It was time she got to work, too.



Deep in the forest, a ragged headband lay at the edge of a swiftly running brook, caught on a jagged rock in the shallows. It bore little resemblance to the cheery red one that Snow White had been wearing when she fled from the Huntsman. And yet it was.

The sunlight gleamed off of something sharp and silver as a knife arced through the air, stabbing the headband. Giving a satisfied grunt, the Captain of the Guard turned the blade in a sunbeam, examining closely the item he had skewered. Without a doubt, it belonged to the girl the Queen was adamant that they find as soon as possible.

The Captain of the Guard looked around at the handful of soldiers who surrounded him, all their eyes staring at him as they waited for his command. With the wave of a hand, he gave his order. "Fan out. Three miles in every direction. She isn't far."





Snow White had been walking for hours, unaware of the danger that surrounded her. Beneath her feet, leaves crunched, and in the forest on either side of her, animals hooted and chirped. Still she kept her back straight and her head high. She had escaped the Queen, survived the dark and terrifying woods, and befriended seven strangers. She reached up and ran her fingers over the words on her locket. She *was* feeling brave. Braver and more fearless than she had felt in a long time.

A loud cracking noise came from somewhere nearby and she jumped. Okay, maybe not completely fearless.

She spotted a break in the trees. Rushing forward, she left the shadows of the woods and found herself on a road. It was more of a cart path, really, but nevertheless, it looked well used, which meant perhaps she would find people on it—people who might lead her to her father.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped onto the path and began to walk. She hadn't gone far when, all at once, a pair of hands grabbed her from behind —one clapping itself over her mouth to prevent her from screaming, and the other dragging her back into the thicket of trees she had just left.

"Don't say a word," a man said in a low tone.

Just as Snow White started to struggle, it hit her that she knew the man whose arms surrounded her. It was the thief from the castle!

The thunder of hooves appeared out of nowhere. Snow White shrank back against the man as two Palace Guards flew by on their mounts. If she had been in the clearing, they would have seen her and taken her back to the Queen.

Holding her breath, she watched them pass, waiting for the dust from their horses' hooves to die down before she even thought about moving. She continued to wait with the thief pressed against her back until the sight and sound of the guards disappeared. And then she waited a moment longer. Finally Snow White pushed her rescuer's arms off her and backed up into the clearing. Her eyes were blazing as she looked at the familiar figure in front of her. "You."

"When I told you to come see what it was like out here, I didn't expect you to bring half the Palace Guards with you," he said as he moved forward out of the trees.

Snow White breathed in sharply. "I didn't exactly invite them. The Queen wants me dead. I had no choice but to run."

The thief stared at her, softly shaking his head. "Next time, try running somewhere else. The last thing I need is the Queen's cavalry in my backyard."

She gasped at his utter callousness, watching as he started to walk away. Snow White hated to admit it to herself, but he knew the forest far better than she did, and he would be able to help her avoid the guards. With a sigh of reluctance, she began to follow him. "I'm looking for my father," she announced. "I thought you could help me."

The man stopped and looked at her, his brows drawn together in confusion.

"You're loyal to the one true king?" Snow White asked.

It took a beat before he made the connection, but when he did, he nodded. "Right. Absolutely. And we hear whispers," he admitted. "Some people say he was taken prisoner in the Southern Kingdom, but ..."

Snow White felt her stomach drop as she realized the truth. "You have no idea where he is."

The thief just shrugged. "I'm sorry to disappoint. You must have mistaken me for a knight in shining armor."

"I thought you might know something," Snow White countered.

"No, of course," he said snidely. "Princesses are always waiting for a prince to show up or a king to come back—"

"My father is the only one who can restore the kingdom to what it was," Snow White interrupted, feeling her face flush as her voice rose.

"Little late for that, I'm afraid."

"Obviously you've forgotten how it used to be, when people were kind and fair," Snow White argued.

With a small laugh, her rescuer spread his arms. "I wish I could stay here, pondering lofty concepts like kindness and fairness."

He pointed out to her the bleakness of the situation in the whole kingdom—the lack of food or any prospects for work, the absolute direness of life in the moment. People needed to do whatever they could in order to survive. Snow White didn't want to acknowledge the doom and gloom he was spreading, but she knew his words were true.

Holding his closed fist out to her, he opened it, palm up. There in the center was a beautiful, and familiar, silver necklace.

Snow White's fingers reached immediately to her neck, where her father's gift had lain ever since he had given it to her. But all she found was a bare collarbone. "So you've moved on from potatoes?" she questioned, snatching her necklace from him and putting it back on.

He shrugged before admitting, "I have many talents."

Without her knowledge, he used the sleight of hand trick to once again acquire her necklace, but this time, Snow White was immediately aware that she no longer wore it. And she was a quick learner. Using his own trick against him, she began to slowly pull the necklace away from the thief.

But she stopped when a voice boomed out over the road: "Do not move, m'lady! You are in the presence of the rebel Quigg—master of the crossbow. Hands up. Step away from our captain and no harm will come to you."

Not wanting to risk an arrow to the back, Snow White stopped and put her hands into the air. Then, very slowly, she turned around.

"It's okay," the thief said. "She's with me. You can lower your weapon." Snow White found herself staring at a group of so-called rebels. And instead of a crossbow, the man who had called out held ... a slingshot.

"You don't have a crossbow?" Snow White asked, confused.

Quigg shrugged but kept his hands up in front of him as if he were holding one. "It was stolen," he answered.

His words brought Snow White's eyes to a cart that rested behind them: a cart that was piled high with loot of all sorts and sizes—gems, a big rag doll, and bolts of fine and bright fabrics.

"Loyal to the king," Snow White scoffed, looking at the rebel captain. "You're just a common criminal."

"The name's Jonathan, Princess," he said. Then he paused. "Not 'Jonathan Princess.' Just 'Jonathan' ... Princess."

Suddenly, an arrow whizzed by her head, narrowly missing her. It hit a nearby tree, embedding itself into the trunk with a thwack. A moment later, trumpets sounded, and more arrows flew through the air.

They were under attack.





"Take cover!" one of the bandits shouted.

Jonathan grabbed Snow White's hand and dragged her behind a giant log. The rest of the bandits followed.

"It's the Palace Guard," Quigg hissed. "Two soldiers for every one of us!"

Snow White peeked over the log. Her eyes widened, and her cheeks paled. There, on a ridge overlooking the path and the woods beyond, were at least a dozen of the Queen's guards. They had their bows drawn and continued to rain down arrows on the band of rebels. Even from a distance, Snow White could see a banner with the Queen's sigil flapping in the air as one of the guards held it aloft. Her stomach twisted.

Urging their mounts forward, the guards moved closer. "Surrender in the name of the Queen, bandits!" the Captain of the Guard shouted out.

Beside Snow White, Jonathan shifted nervously. His usual bravado aside, he was a smart young man. He knew the situation was not leaning in their favor.

Just then, the Captain of the Guard spoke again. "We are searching for the princess Snow White! Show your faces!"

It had been one thing when the Queen sent the Huntsman to kill her. He was but one man. This was the entire guard. And she had no weapons, no

idea how to protect herself, and only a merry band of rebels with questionable hygiene and even more questionable ethics to help her.

As arrows hit the trees and grass around them, Snow White saw something flicker in Jonathan's eyes—something protective and caring. He could just hand her over and walk away. Wasn't that what a real thief would do? Yet ... he wasn't one, she realized. Not a true one. There was more to him.

As if to prove her point, Jonathan finally said, "You need to run, Princess."

"She's the princess?" Quigg questioned, his eyes moving from Snow White to his captain and back to the other bandits.

"Snow White? She's still alive?" asked the bandit Maple, who perched behind the rock next to Quigg.

"What about all of you?" Snow White said, gesturing to the others. They had grabbed branches and sticks and were holding them out as if that could protect them from the guards' weapons.

"Don't worry about us," Jonathan said, smiling. "We'll hold them off." Snow White looked up at the hill where the guard was fast approaching. Then she glanced back at the band of rebels. True, they were thieves. But they had never hurt her. Not like the Queen, who had broken her spirit day by day. And they weren't bad by nature. They had no other choice but to live this life, because the Queen had made it impossible to live any other way. That was what Jonathan had told her, and she believed him. If she were to run away from the fight now, she would be little better than the Queen.

Opening his palm, Jonathan handed Snow White her necklace. "It's not your problem."

Snow White squeezed the necklace in her hand. He was wrong. It was her problem. She had hidden behind the castle walls for far too long, casting wishes into a well. Meanwhile, the Queen had ruined the kingdom and made honest folk turn into thieves. It was absolutely Snow White's problem. She reached down and picked up her own branch. "I won't leave," she said stubbornly.

"I'm not asking," Jonathan said, his expression equally stubborn.

"I'm making it a fair fight," Snow White protested.

A smile tugged at Jonathan's lips. "Yeah, the thing is ... I don't fight fair."

This time when the Captain of the Guard's voice boomed out, it was from just on the other side of the rock. "We are willing to offer a handsome reward for any information on her whereabouts!"

And then, before she could stop him, Jonathan stood up behind the rock, his arms in the air. "Don't shoot!" he called out. "I surrender."

The guards turned, training their arrows at his exposed chest. Around him, the other rebels stood up and joined him, their weapons lowered and their arms raised. Snow White shivered as she realized what they were doing. They were sacrificing themselves—for her. She looked up at Jonathan. He smiled gently and then nodded toward the forest. His message was clear: *Get out of here*.

This time, she didn't argue. She turned and moved toward the trees.

"Detain them all for questioning," the Captain of the Guard declared.

But Snow White couldn't resist taking one look back. To her surprise, Jonathan's eyes were still on her. Something passed between them, and then he gave her a small smile and turned to the soldiers. She slipped behind the nearest tree and allowed herself one moment to watch.

As the Palace Guard stomped toward Jonathan and the bandits, Snow White's heart pounded faster. She squeezed her fists at her sides, forcing herself not to call out. But while she was worried, Jonathan didn't seem to have a care in the world. He just stood there, watching as the guard came closer ... and closer ... and still closer.

When they were nearly on him, he said, "Now!"

Then, lifting a branch, he charged. The bandits followed.

Snow White knew she had to go. She turned and ran farther into the woods. Behind her, she heard rough-and-tumble sounds. Her footsteps slowed. She knew that Jonathan wanted her to flee. She knew that he and the others were fighting to keep her safe. But she had gotten them all into this mess. And now she was going to help them get out of it. She had said she wasn't going to leave, and she meant it.

Stopping in a clearing, Snow White realized that the woodland creatures that had been by her side since she entered the woods were still there. It was her own merry band, just like Jonathan had teased her about. But while he

saw the creatures as silly and part of her princess persona, she saw them as allies. They could help her—and the bandits.

Turning to them, she said, "I'm going to need your help." Then she began to lay out her plan.



Back at the path, Jonathan and the bandits continued to fight. But it wasn't going well. They were wildly outnumbered, and while they had made a decent attempt at holding the guards back, the rebels had been pushed to the edge of the forest.

Jonathan squinted as he saw some sort of creature enter the clearing. An animal—he couldn't tell if it was a chipmunk, a squirrel, or a bunny—was dragging what looked like the fabric from the cart. And was it stuffed with leaves? He shook his head again. He definitely wasn't seeing things clearly.

Rubbing his chin, Jonathan tried to find a way out of the situation. But no matter where he looked or what scheme he concocted, the truth was impossible to ignore. They were surrounded. And there was no escaping. They were done for. He had let his men down and now could only hope that, at the least, Snow White had managed to escape.

Suddenly a voice rang out behind them.

"You seek Snow White," the voice called from the trees. "Look no further! She's over here."

Jonathan's eyes widened. He knew that voice. That was Snow White! What was she doing?

As the soldiers scrambled up the hill, Snow White, as swiftly and silently as she was able, sprinted toward where the Captain of the Guard's horse had been tied up.

At the same time, the Captain of the Guard shouted happily as he began backing up the hill. "This way!" he called out to his soldiers. "Let the rabble scurry back to whatever rathole they crawled out of...."

The guards rushed toward where Snow White's voice had come from.

The bandits turned as one and seized their opportunity to run. They headed into the woods, toward the Captain's now angry shouts, in an effort to delay them. Whatever Snow White's distraction had been, the Captain

was not pleased. He was yelling at his men, and as Jonathan and the others sprinted into the clearing, he saw why. The animals *had* been dragging fabric through the woods! He hadn't been seeing things. And at some point, Snow White's little woodland friends had slipped into it, making it move as if it were being worn. From a distance, it would have looked like a real person. But the Captain had clearly discovered the truth.

"She's in league with the bandits!" he shouted. "Spread out and find them!"

Various detachment of guards headed out in all directions as the Captain yelled out, "Where's my horse?"

Jonathan and the others kept running, and a moment later, they jumped down into a deep ravine, determined to get out of sight. Snow White appeared riding a horse out of the woods, dismounted, and fell in beside them. He glanced at her. Despite the danger, she was smiling, pleased with her ruse. They all stared at her in awe as she tried to catch her breath.

"Why come back?" Jonathan said, his surprise evident in the tone of his voice.

"Someone had to solve your princess problem," she said, smiling at him. "I told you I'd fight with you."

He smiled back, suddenly seeing her as a strong young woman and not as a princess who just needed to be rescued. "I guess you meant it."

"I guess so," she responded.

"You continue to impress me," he told her honestly.

His words took Snow White by surprise, and she blushed slightly in delight. "Well, gosh. A compliment like that. Coming from a criminal mastermind like yourself ..."

With a series of hand motions, Jonathan dispatched the other bandits to check the surrounding area to make sure they were safe ... for the time being. "The people, they despise the Queen. They're afraid. That's why we fight in your father's name. Your parents weren't afraid of anything. It made us all feel a little braver. It gave everyone hope."

Jonathan's sincerity shone through, and Snow White nodded in appreciation. He turned to address one of his men just in time to see a guard taking aim at Snow White. The guard let his arrow fly. Not stopping to think, Jonathan grabbed Snow White and pulled her back, out of harm's way. Unfortunately, it put him right into it. He felt a jolt and then a stab of

pain as the arrow meant for her lodged itself in his shoulder. Quigg rushed over, seeing the sacrifice his captain had made. Meanwhile, the bandit Finch appeared behind the guard, who was hurriedly reloading, and knocked him over the head with a large stone.

"Jonathan!" Snow White said when she heard his grunt of pain. Turning, she saw the arrow in the back of his shoulder. Her face paled, and she reached out to grab his hand, steadying him.

A weak smile spread over his face as their hands touched. But then his vision began to blur, and there was a loud ringing in his ears. "I think we have a bit of a problem, Princess," he said as his knees buckled and he sank to the ground.

"He's going to need a doctor!" Maple shouted nearby. And then Jonathan felt hands lifting him and carrying him away from the guards.

The last thing he heard before he slipped out of consciousness was Snow White's voice: "I think I know one...."





As Snow White led the bandits through the woods toward the cottage, her heart thudded. Jonathan was hurt—badly. The arrow was lodged deep in his shoulder, and before he passed out, his face had been full of pain.

The others were silent as they made their way farther into the woods. The lack of noise worried Snow White almost as much as the occasional groan that slipped from Jonathan's lips. Their silence made clear the danger their leader was in. Spotting a familiar clearing ahead, Snow White sighed with relief. They had arrived.

Pushing open the door, she found her seven friends gathered around the kitchen table. She hadn't stopped to wonder if they might be home and was thankful they were. As Finch and Maple placed Jonathan gently down on a table outside, Snow White led the seven to him and quickly filled them in on what had transpired.

When she got to the part about needing Doc to take out the arrow, she saw him gulp.

"Doc' is more of a sobriquet rather than a technical title," he said, sweat beading on his forehead. "My true expertise lies in the study of igneous, sedimentary, and metamorphic granules...."

The others stared at him with blank expressions.

"You know," Doc said, putting on his headlamp and lifting his pickaxe, which he then held nervously in his hands. "Rocks."

Just then, Jonathan let out another groan of pain.

There was no one else who could help, so even if it was in name only, Doc was going to have to step up. The other six were currently involved in an intense staring contest with the thieves. Grumpy was standing in the door, acting as guard, with his arms crossed over his chest and a grumpier-than-usual expression on his face.

"I'm sorry," Doc went on. "I don't think I can help him."

Snow White opened her mouth to protest, but Quigg beat her to it. "I am the rebel Quigg—master of the crossbow. And I'm ordering you to save him."

"We haven't even been introduced yet," Doc said, clearly trying to buy himself time. "In alphabetical order, of course ..."

Snow White cut him off. "Doc, please. We don't have time!" she said, her voice shaking as she looked at Jonathan. His face had grown even paler. "He's badly injured! You have to help!"

"But they're bandits!" Grumpy called from the doorway.

"What are you going to do about it?" Finch argued from where he stood at the window.

Snow White groaned. She was sure that if Jonathan were awake, he would have something to say about that. But as he wasn't, she knew it was up to her to stop any potential brawl between the two groups. The last thing they needed was her seven friends and the rebels getting into a fight and abandoning any attempt to save Jonathan.

Snow White had had enough of everyone bickering. She had had enough of the fighting and the seizing and the running. This wasn't a joke anymore. Jonathan was hurt. And if they didn't focus on that, he was going to die, and then what good would that do? She brought her fingers to her lips and let out a piercing whistle.

Instantly, everyone stopped fighting.

"This is *exactly* how the Queen would want us to behave," she said, standing tall and keeping her voice even. Snow White thought about all the times she had seen her father address the villagers, reassuring them in times of difficulty and encouraging them in times of joy. Channeling him as best she could, she went on. "Fighting each other. Distrusting each other. This is

how she wins. She gathers strength from weakness, wealth from poverty, beauty from other's lack." She paused to take a breath, the weight of the room on her. Her words were powerful and came from a place of truth and understanding. She had been a victim of the Queen's for far too long. "She's poisoned us into believing it's everyone for themselves. But if we can give up our meager scraps, we will inherit what was meant for all of us. And it's more than *any* of us can imagine. It just requires *faith* in each other." She stopped and waited, not sure if her words would move any of them.

For a long moment, all was silent, save for Jonathan's labored breathing. And then, to her surprise, one of the outlaws dropped to his knee and bowed his head. Grumpy wiped a tear from his eye. And the others gave her reassuring smiles.

She had done it. She had convinced them to stop their petty squabbles and focus on the greater good.

Now she just needed Doc to save Jonathan. Turning to him, she said, "Help him. Please."

Doc sighed before taking off his glasses and wiping them on his shirt. He nodded slowly. "Bring him inside."



As the afternoon sunlight slid through the window of the Queen's bedchamber, she sat before her mirror, preening in front of her reflection as she waited for one of her many servants to adorn her with a jewel-encrusted necklace.

A heavy knock sounded on her door, and the Queen waved for her servant to answer it. A handful of guards stood in the doorway, their nervousness apparent from the way they fidgeted and shifted their weight. One stepped forward as the Queen looked at them expectantly. "Your Majesty. Word from the Captain. They found the princess."

The Queen turned back to her reflection, all smiles as she stared at her own image. "And where is she now?" she questioned.

The pause the soldier gave was long. "It appears ... she escaped—with the help of the bandits."

The Queen's already pale complexion turned even whiter. "The bandits?" she questioned.

Her chair scraped across the floor with a loud rasping sound that echoed through the otherwise silent chamber. She stood, her hands clenched into fists as she tried to maintain her poise and composure. "Do you have any idea what this means?" she asked the guards. But she didn't wait on an answer. "She is gathering strength. Turning the people against their rightful queen."

The Queen took a deep breath as she fought back a tidal wave of panic that threatened to overwhelm her. "Although I can't help but wonder ... if they turn against me, what do you think happens to you?"

The skirts of her gown swished around her legs as she walked the length of the line of guards, back and forth, looking pointedly at each one of them. "Do you even remember the ugly little lives I saved you from?" she demanded. "Your ugly little farms and your ugly little shops. She'll take away everything I've given you."

The Queen stopped right in the middle, getting in the face of the one guard who had stepped forward. "All the power. All the beauty," she sneered.

Unable to repress the panic any longer, she began to scream. "Is that what you want?"



The sun had begun to sink behind the trees as Doc continued to work on Jonathan. The cottage was thick with tension. The rebels had gone inside, and now they paced along one edge of the table while the cottage's inhabitants paced along the other. In the middle, bent over his patient, Doc worked on Jonathan's wound.

Snow White was exhausted. So much had happened in such a short time. She had left the castle, escaped the Huntsman, befriended seven strangers, evaded the Queen's guards, and encountered the ragtag rebels. And she had gotten to know Jonathan. Despite his bravado, she knew he was a kind and bighearted man—someone who would put his rebels' needs before his own. Someone who would help a stranger like her.

Sighing, she slipped through the door of the cottage into the late-afternoon light. The trees looked like they were on fire as the setting sun bathed them in its glow. The forest creatures were quiet, also waiting for Jonathan's recovery. Staring at the peaceful scene, Snow White tried to calm her racing heart and mind.

"Hot milk?" Turning, Snow White saw Sleepy. He was holding a steaming mug in his hand. She noticed the others had left the cottage, too, and now everyone was mingling outside. "It helps me sleep."

"Thank you," she said, taking the mug and giving him a small smile. She was grateful for the distraction, at least.

Together, they stared into the trees, with Snow White taking occasional sips of the hot drink. Sleepy had been right. It did make her feel calm.

Just then, Doc appeared. Spotting Snow White, he moved toward her. She waited, holding back tears. Maple approached and gently put a hand on her shoulder as they waited for the news.

Doc removed his hat and held it in his hands. "I used the blast furnace to get through the bedrock," he began, "then drilled to the fissure core, added a poultice or two, a dose of acetum saturninum, acid of sulfur dulcified ..."

Snow White stared at him. He was speaking in gibberish. Had he saved Jonathan or not? She was about to ask when, suddenly, Jonathan appeared in the doorway.

"Well, that was unpleasant!" he said. He was bandaged in a rather odd way, and he looked confused—but he was alive!

"I thought he was dead," Doc admitted to himself.

The clearing erupted in cheers as everyone let out shouts of joy at seeing Jonathan on his feet. The bandits quickly surrounded their captain, hugging him—gently—and welcoming him back. The miners did the same, only they surrounded Doc, giving him hugs and congratulating him on a job well done.

Snow White didn't know whether to collapse or cry or both. Seeing Jonathan filled her with happiness, and before she knew what she was doing, she found herself rushing toward him. She was about to throw her arms around him when she stopped herself, suddenly aware of the audience.

Then she looked at her seven friends. "Thank you, Doc."

Doc shrugged but looked quite pleased with himself. "Of course," he said. "I would do anything for Snow White's ... special friend."

Dozens of eyes turned and stared at Jonathan and Snow White. She felt heat rise on her cheeks and was happy to see Jonathan's ears turn red.

"Oh, no, no, no!" she protested.

"What? No!" Jonathan said at the same time.

They continued to stumble over each other's words, trying to show just how little it mattered to them while everyone watched with smug smiles on their faces. "Would've done—" Snow White said.

"Exactly—" Jonathan interrupted.

"For anyone—nothing to do with you," she said with a groan.

Jonathan nodded. "Right. Run-of-the-mill kindness. Totally nonspecific."

Snow White looked at him. "Nothing to do with you—with him ..."

Snow White had the sudden urge to find a cave to hide in. She wished that the ground underneath her would open or that a flock of birds would appear in the sky, swoop down, and fly her away. This was wildly embarrassing. And she wasn't entirely sure she was all that pleased with Jonathan's displeasure at the idea she might have helped him specifically. But then again, she was trying to make it clear it wasn't anything special.

Stepping between them, Happy looked back and forth between Jonathan and Snow White. He didn't seem at all bothered by the obvious tension between the two. Instead, he seemed pleased. A huge smile spread across his face. "Oh, isn't this just wonderful?" he said, clapping his hands together. "You know what time it is, fellas?"

Snow White shook her head. To her annoyance, so did Jonathan.

While neither of them had any inkling what time it was, Grumpy clearly did. And he clearly did not like it. His eyes darted toward the thick trees, like he was thinking of making a run for it. "Please, no," he begged.

In answer, the sound of a guitar filled the clearing. Snow White turned and saw that Sneezy had pulled out the instrument and was slowly strumming it. The sound was lovely, twinkling like the stars that had begun to appear in the evening sky. Still smiling, Happy pulled out a flute while Bashful appeared with a harmonica—though he quickly hid so no one could actually see him play.

"It's time to dance!" Sneezy declared.

As Snow White watched with growing delight, an impromptu celebration began. Everyone joined in, eager to let loose after a tense day. The music grew louder as a makeshift dance floor was set up in the clearing. In one corner, Sneezy and the bandit named Bingley played the piano they had dragged outside, accompanied by Finch on the guitar. Those who weren't playing instruments began to dance a merry jig, the sound of their tapping shoes on the ground adding to the lively beat of the music.

In the rush and frenzy of the dance, Snow White found herself pulled away from Jonathan. He was taken to the far side of the clearing, where he was surrounded by miners and rebels, the center of attention as he entertained them with the story of his heroic rescue and the pain of his wound. Every so often, his gaze drifted to her, and their eyes met for a moment. But then Snow White, or Jonathan, looked away.

Hoping to distract herself from the riotous feelings filling her head and heart, Snow White focused on the dancers. Maple and Quigg had quickly taken center stage and were sharing a jig in the middle of the room. Both were smiling broadly, the picture of happiness as they moved about the dance floor, lost in the music. Snow White couldn't help smiling herself as she saw the absolute joy in their faces. She felt that strange pang again. She had never really given much thought to dancing and music and all those things. They hadn't been a part of her life for so long. But now, seeing these two, and feeling Jonathan's eyes on her, she wondered what it would be like to dance with such abandon.

Spotting Snow White, Quigg joined her. "You and Maple are fine dancers," Snow White said.

Quigg blushed. "We're just friends," he said, taking off his hat and nervously wringing it in his hands.

"Right," Snow White said.

"You know...." Quigg coughed. "Like you and Jonathan."

This time it was Snow White who blushed. "I'm pretty sure Jonathan only cares about himself," Snow White said, but her words sounded hollow, even to her. She couldn't deny that there was something between them.

"Is that why he took an arrow for you?" Quigg asked.

Snow White's eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open. "What?" she asked, shaking her head. He couldn't mean what she thought he meant. Jonathan had been hit by an arrow meant for him—hadn't he?

"We all saw it," Quigg said. "That selfish no-good thief? He saved your life." With his earth-shattering news dropped, Quigg shrugged and walked away.

Snow White's head was spinning. If what Quigg had said was true—and there was no reason for him to lie to her, so she had to assume it was—Jonathan had protected her, risking his own life. So when he said that he was just doing something ordinary, he had been lying. Because no one stepped in front of an arrow for just anyone. So that meant ... Could he truly care for her?

She saw that Jonathan and Dopey were now chasing fireflies. Dopey held a jar in his hand as he tried to catch one. Jonathan's face glowed in the soft light created by the bugs. A warm feeling flooded through her as she watched them. When she left the castle, she had assumed that her journey would be a lonely one—that she would have to face the road alone, dodging shadows and trudging along pathways without anyone beside her. And then she had met the seven, and a piece of her heart had begun to hope that maybe things could be different, that she could find a place outside the castle where she belonged.

And the feeling had only grown when she found the strength to continue on her journey to find the rebels and get answers. She had felt herself coming alive when she faced off against the band in the beginning and then felt even more energized as she and Jonathan bickered over who would help whom. Until then, she realized, she had been asleep, walking through her life in a daze and not ever really noticing the world around her. Yet ever since she entered the woods, she had been awake.

Staring at Jonathan, she realized that she had set out to find her father and return to the castle—to the way things had been. But now she wasn't sure she wanted that at all. As if pulled by some invisible string, she found herself moving closer and closer to Jonathan. Their eyes locked, and she saw something flash in his—an understanding? A spark? Moving away from Dopey, he walked toward her until they met.

For a long moment, they simply stood there, inches apart, eyes still locked. Snow White had never felt like this before—like Jonathan could help her live her dreams, like he could make her world brighter. And now, this close, she could see that perhaps Quigg hadn't been wrong, that Jonathan cared for her, too. She leaned forward. Jonathan did the same.

"Hi," they said at the same time, meeting in the middle. They were unaware that the music had stopped and that they were being watched by all their friends, frozen in anticipation of what might happen next.

That was when a loud trumpet sounded in the distance.





Instantly, everyone in the clearing was on alert. Jonathan's eyes flew toward the sound. "We have to leave," he said. "Grab your things."

"Yes, Captain," Quigg said, gesturing to the bandits to gather their things. They didn't hesitate. Immediately, the relaxed mood of the party was replaced with tension.

Snow White frowned. "But—" She didn't want them to leave. Why couldn't they stay? Wouldn't it be better if they fought together than if they split up?

As if reading her mind, Jonathan shook his head. "I can't let the Queen's soldiers find this place ..." he said, pointing at the seven. Despite the stern look on Grumpy's face, Snow White could tell he was nervous. And so were the others.

"I'm coming with you," Snow White said.

"No," Jonathan said firmly. "It's too dangerous. You're the one they're looking for." Jonathan met her gaze and held it. "I'll be back in two days," he said. "And together we'll go to the Southern Kingdom and find your father."

The word *together* made Snow White's heart thud against her chest—as did the hope in Jonathan's voice. Perhaps there was reason to believe in more than one dream. Perhaps she *could* have what her heart desired—and

give the kingdom back what it needed: a fair and brave ruler. She lifted her hand to her neck, unclasped her necklace, and held it out to Jonathan. She wasn't sure she had the words to express how much his hope meant to her. She did her best. "Here," she said. "He gave this to me. Take it for luck."

"I ... I can't accept," Jonathan said, shaking his head. He moved to push the necklace back toward her palm and, in doing so, interwove his fingers with hers. They both looked down at their hands, now clasped together. Neither moved away.

"I'm not giving it to you," she said. "Just giving you reason to return."

She watched as her words hit Jonathan. He looked down at the heart-shaped necklace in his hand and then back up at her. His face shifted, and a smile lit up his eyes. Slowly, reluctantly, he let go of her hand. He didn't say anything more on the subject, but Snow White knew he had heard her.

Turning, Jonathan waved goodbye to the others, and he made sure to give his new friend Dopey a hug. Then he looked at the rebels and nodded at the woods. "Who fights in the name of the King?" he shouted.

"I!" Quigg shouted back.

"And I!" the others echoed.

"Well, come on, then! All right, split up, we'll lure the guards away from the cottage...."

"Hey, thanks for having us!" Farno called out with a wave.

And before Snow White could even lift a hand to in response, Jonathan and the others slipped into the woods, calling out to the guards as they went. "Over here!"



At the sound of Jonathan's voice, the Captain of the Guard called out to his men, "This way!"

Jonathan knew what he was doing was foolish. He and his men were no match for the Queen's guard. But he wasn't going to lead them to Snow White. She had been trapped for too long already. The idea of her once again being under the rule of the Queen—made to feel like she wasn't good enough, and pushed to believe that being kind was a fault—did not sit well with him. True, when he had first met her, he had believed Snow White was

as bad as the Queen: vapid, vain, content to live inside the castle walls and outside reality.

But Snow White was different. He had seen it from the moment she met his gaze when he was chained up at the castle. And he had known it when she didn't abandon them to the guards. It was evident in every action she took. So even if it meant putting himself at risk, Jonathan would throw himself between the guards and Snow White. He would prove himself more than a thief.

Oh, how things had changed.

Dashing through the forest, away from the cottage, he muttered to himself, "Well, Jonathan, ol' boy, you did it." His tone was dry, matter-of-fact. Because he *had* done it. "You're one of the good guys now. Steadfast. Faithful. Honest ..." He stopped, and cupping his hands around his mouth, he shouted back at the guards. His voice, thrown by the trees, made it sound like he was in one spot in the forest even as he took off toward another. He needed to put more distance between himself and Snow White. He had to keep her safe. The thought made him shake his head and smile at the same time. "No more thieving. No more gold. Just good old, salt of the earth, fine, upstanding—"

Before he could finish the list of his new adjectives, he felt the ground fall away as he swung up into the air. He had been caught—in one of his own nets. "Idiot," he muttered.

Looking down, he groaned. Two of the Queen's guards peered up at him, clearly pleased as punch. Well, this wasn't good. Below him, one of the guards nodded toward his horse and said something about taking him back to the castle. Nope, this wasn't good at all.



It only got worse. After an uncomfortable ride, during which he was forced to wrap his arms around a particularly pungent guard, Jonathan found himself back in the throne room.

The Queen sat, her eyes cold, her expression even colder. She waited until he had been thrown on his knees in front of her before she spoke.

Beside him, the Captain of the Guard kept a hand on his shoulder, forcing him to stay down.

"Where is Snow White?" the Queen asked, tapping her fingernails on the arm of the throne.

"Snow who?"

Her eyes narrowed as she looked at him. Jonathan tried to keep his own expression blank. But she seemed to see through him—see something he was only just allowing himself to see. "You're protecting her," the Queen finally said, disgusted by the idea that anyone would help the girl.

Jonathan didn't say a word.

"Answer Her Majesty!" the Captain of the Guard shouted, grabbing Jonathan.

Struggling against the ties that bound his hands together, Jonathan tried to stay away from the Captain. But it was no use. He fell forward, barely avoiding slamming his face into the cold, hard ground. Snow White's necklace slipped from his pocket and fell on the floor. The sound echoed through the chamber.

Jonathan tried to look nonchalant. But the Queen knew immediately what he had been carrying—and what it meant.

The Captain of the Guard snatched it up and placed it in her palm. Lifting the locket, she smiled as the sun made it sparkle. To the guard she said, "Show me where you found him."

"In the forest, two furlongs south of the crossroads," the Captain of the Guard informed the Queen.

Jonathan's heart began to thud. One of the guards grabbed him and hauled him to his feet. As he was dragged out of the throne room, Jonathan looked back at the Queen. Her smug expression made him furious. "I'm sure you think you got this one licked, 'Your Majesty,'" he called over his shoulder. "But trust me. You don't know what you're up against. See, unlike you, I know her."

The Queen smiled. "I think you mean 'knew," she said. Then, giving him a little wave as her guards continued to drag him out, she added, "Never send an army to accomplish what one woman can do on her own. It's time for Snow White and I to have a little talk."

A shiver ran through Jonathan as the doors to the throne room slammed behind him. The Queen was a terrible person. But she was also powerful.

And while he had faith in Snow White's heart, she was innocent and pure—a disadvantage when facing off against evil.

He just had to hope that wherever she was, she was safe—and somewhere the Queen could never find her.





The Queen was delighted. Thanks to that silly little thief, she was going to find Snow White. And when she did, she was going to get rid of her.

She strode across her chamber, grabbed the small box meant for Snow White's heart, and clutched it in her long fingers. Then she twisted a small mirror on her vanity. A large map of the kingdom appeared on the wall next to the vanity. And behind it, hidden from view, was a secret chamber.

Slipping inside, the Queen took a deep breath. The smell of potent flowers and herbs filled her nose. This was where she housed her magic, which she had kept hidden from the King long before and from all others since. Standing in front of a long table, she eyed the various vials on a shelf in front of her. She took several down, placed them on the table, and began to pour a little of this and a little of that into a jar. As she worked, she sang to herself, calling forth the magic's full power, brewing something dark and otherworldly. When she was finished, she took a deep breath and then drank deeply from the jar.

She swallowed every last drop, then turned from the room toward a hidden staircase. The stairs spiraled down, down, down into the dark recesses beneath the castle. Making sure the door behind her was shut, she moved down the stairs. As she did, the potion began to take effect. Her skin began to wrinkle. Her nose grew longer, and her teeth began to rot. A breeze

from below whipped her hair around her face, and as she watched, it transformed from dark brown to pure white. Her regal gown turned into rags, and by the time she reached the bottom of the stairs, she was no longer the gorgeous queen she had been mere moments before. Now she was a wretched old hag.

Surprisingly, though, it did not make her upset. Instead, she cackled with glee. This was the first step in her latest plan to rid herself of Snow White. Stepping into the room deep beneath her chambers, she gazed around. The huge dungeon made the smaller space upstairs look like a child's lab.

Here were her darkest potions, her strongest poisons, her most evil herbs. In the middle of the room, a giant cauldron was mounted above the floor. Next to it, on an ornate stand, a worn book lay open. The pages were yellowed and frayed with use. The Queen hobbled to it and flipped through the book, scanning the various spells. She stopped when she found the one she had been looking for. Hungrily, she read over the directions, her cackle echoing off the stone walls.

Running her fingers over the words, she made sure she had all the ingredients. And then she checked one last thing. *Antidote*, she read silently. *True love's kiss*. She cackled louder. Snow White had barely left the castle. Her father was long gone, and her mother was in the ground.



Deep in the dungeon, Jonathan pulled desperately against the chains of his cell wall. He had to escape. He had to warn Snow White.

"That won't get you free."

Jonathan squealed at the sound of someone else's voice. He turned and peered into the shadows of the cell. To his surprise, he saw the outline of another man, with his back up against the far wall. His head was bowed, a dark cloak covering his hair. It had kept him hidden from Jonathan's view—until then.

Catching his breath, Jonathan narrowed his eyes. The cell was getting lighter as the sun rose, and now he could make out exactly who his cellmate was: the Huntsman.

He stopped struggling long enough for his eyes to fall on a still-cuffed skeleton that lay on the ground.



Standing over the cauldron, the Queen began to throw in a drop of this, a dash of that. The liquid in the cauldron began to bubble and belch out unnaturally colored fumes. A foul odor filled the air, but the Queen was immune. She didn't notice the eyes of her vulture on her, either, as it watched its mistress from a nearby perch. She was focused on one thing, and one thing only—creating the potion that would destroy Snow White.

When she was sure it was ready, she curled her long bony fingernails around the wooden box. The Huntsman was supposed to have put Snow White's heart in it. Instead, he had substituted a ripe red apple. And now she would use the same apple to trick the girl.

She used a long spoon to dip the apple into the potion, and let it sit for several moments. More smoke billowed forth, and the pungent smell of death and decay became stronger. When enough time had passed, she lifted the apple. A thick blue sludge oozed off the skin and back into the cauldron. The Queen cackled once again with glee.

She waved her fingers over the sickly skin, turning it from blue to bright, shiny red. It now looked like an ordinary piece of fruit, just like the ones Snow White had picked in the orchard with her father and mother. But biting into this apple wouldn't fill her mouth with sugary sweetness.

Gingerly the Queen placed the now poisoned apple back in the box and tucked it into her robes. The best part of her whole plan? Snow White would never suspect a harmless old lady. She was too kind, too trusting, too ... lovely. The Queen would use those very qualities against her. She let out another cackle.

She turned and made her way toward the far end of the chamber. Water lapped against the edge of a stone dock, and in the inky liquid, a single-person gondola floated. She had kept this underground boat at the ready, knowing someday she would have use of it.

Someday had arrived.

She pushed off and rowed herself through the exit and out into the dim light of early evening. Dusk had settled since she entered the chamber, and it was only a matter of time before the sun sank below the horizon and pitched the forest into darkness.

And somewhere out there, Snow White waited, unaware that danger was coming to find her.





Snow White stood at the open window of the cottage. Outside, the sun had risen over the treetops, bathing the clearing in bright light. Absently, she fed a squirrel a tidbit of bread. She had spent a restless night in the cottage, worrying about Jonathan and jumping at every unfamiliar noise. When she had fallen asleep, her dreams had been fractured, with images of the Queen's cruel smile and Jonathan's warm one. As soon as the stars had begun to fade in the sky, she practically leapt from bed and took post at the window. Jonathan had promised he would return. So she would wait to greet him.

In the meantime, she needed to see the miners off to work.

"I don't like it," Grumpy protested. "It's too dangerous. With the Queen's Guard out there, looking for you ..."

"We could come with you ..." Doc offered.

"I can take care of myself," Snow White promised the seven.

"Do you really have to go?" Bashful questioned, wringing his hat in his hands.

Snow White looked at all of their anxious faces and gave a reassuring smile. She was determined and unafraid. "I need to find the truth about my father. If there's any chance he's alive—"

But Happy interrupted her. "And when you find what you're looking for ... you'll come back, right?"

Snow White took a breath to consider what he was saying—what they were all saying, whether they used words or not. "I will. I promise."

At that moment, her eyes met Dopey's. He gave her a smile and a nod, as if he were trying to tell her he believed in her. Snow White squeezed his hand and smiled back. After making sure the miners had everything they needed for their workday, she stood in the cottage doorway and waved goodbye, assuring them that she would be back soon.

But the early-morning mist had burned off, and the sun was high in the sky. Shaking her head, Snow White cleared her mind and set her shoulders. It was time to move on. On the window ledge, the little squirrel chattered angrily. Snow White smiled. She gave the squirrel a gentle pat, then moved into the kitchen and was just about to begin making a meal for her friends. They had a long day of work ahead of them, and she knew they would be hungry when they returned in the evening. The least she could do was make them something delicious to eat. And it would take her mind off Jonathan, too.

Then there was a knock on the door. Relief flooded through Snow White. *Jonathan!* He had returned! He hadn't abandoned her. She rushed to the door and flung it open. But she stopped when she saw who was standing on the stoop.

It wasn't Jonathan. It was an old lady, her shoulders hunched with age, her face lined with deep wrinkles. When she smiled, a single tooth waggled in her mouth. Unprepared for this particular visitor, Snow White took a startled step backward.

"I'm sorry, my dear," the woman said, her voice creaky. "Did I frighten you?"

Snow White composed herself as the squirrel scurried away. Shaking her head, she smiled. "No. I just was ... I thought it might be someone else. Can I help you?"

"It is I who can help you," the woman said. "Are you Snow White? The princess?"

Snow White tilted her head. How on earth could the old woman help her? Her clothes were rags; her body was fragile. It looked like it had been ages since she had had a decent meal. And then another thought flashed through Snow White's mind. The woman had known who she was. Snow White's stomach fluttered nervously, and she wished that her friends weren't so far away. "Who did you say you were?" she asked.

The old woman gave her a one-toothed smile, which did little to reassure Snow White. "I have come with a message," she said. "From Jonathan."

Snow White leaned closer. "Jonathan?" she repeated.

Nodding, the old woman reached into her black cloak. She rummaged around and finally pulled out a necklace. Snow White's eyes widened as she realized that it was *her* necklace, the one she had given Jonathan. That meant ... "I'm afraid he has been captured by the Queen," the old woman said, voicing Snow White's fear.

"Captured?" Snow White shook her head. "No—"

"He gave me this necklace," the woman said. "He said you'd know what it means."

Snow White snatched the necklace from the old woman. Her heart was hammering. She had to get to Jonathan. Who knew what the Queen would do to him? She had most certainly thrown him in the castle's dungeon. But then what? He was a danger to her. He believed in the King and in Snow White. The Queen wouldn't hesitate to rid herself of him—especially if she found out that Snow White cared for him.

She grabbed her cloak from the coatrack by the door and turned to leave. "I need to go to him!" she said, pushing past the old woman and moving into the clearing.

"But what of the danger?" the woman said. Snow White didn't stop. She didn't care about the danger—not to herself, anyway. Behind her, she heard the woman take a sharp breath. "Ah, you love him?"

That made Snow White stop. Slowly, she turned and looked at the woman. Their eyes met. Snow White didn't say anything. But she didn't need to. She knew the truth was written all over her face.

The woman knew it, too. Something flashed in her eyes, making them appear, for just a moment, like the eyes of someone much, much younger. It was a heated look—not a kind one. And it made Snow White feel uncomfortable. But as quickly as it had appeared, the look faded, and the clouded gaze returned to the old woman's eyes. "Well, because love is so precious, I will help you," she said. "Here, take this apple to sustain you on

the road." She reached into her long black cloak and pulled out a perfect, ripe red apple. She held it out to Snow White.

Snow White looked at the apple. She wasn't entirely sure how a single apple would sustain her on the road. Or how it would give her the strength to save Jonathan. But she didn't want to be rude and say as much. So instead, she just looked uncertainly between the woman and the apple.

Sensing Snow White's hesitation, the old woman grew more insistent. "I remember how generous your father was to his people," she said.

At the mention of her father, Snow White's head snapped up. Why would the old woman bring him up? Something seemed off about the whole situation. But then she remembered that the woman knew she was the princess. Perhaps this was her version of kindness, however odd it might be.

The woman continued. "That's why it is an honor to return the favor to his daughter. I don't have much to give...."

Snow White had no choice but to take the apple and hold it in her hand. "Thank you," she said. She felt the old woman's eager eyes on her. Her offer was kind—and harmless. Snow White wasn't sure why she had hesitated in the first place. The woman just wanted to help in the small way she could. And while Snow White was still unsure how the apple would help give her energy on her journey to rescue Jonathan, she figured it was easy enough just to take a bite. Then she could be on her way.

Bringing the ripe red fruit to her lips, she took a small bite. The sweetness filled her mouth, and she smiled. It was a perfect apple. "Thank you," she said again.

The old woman smiled. "For him ... for your father ..."

But then the fruit turned from delightful to sour. Snow White's stomach lurched, and she felt sweat bead on her forehead. Something was wrong—very wrong. She tried to focus, looking at the old woman, but the world was spinning. "What's happening?" she said. It was getting harder to breathe. She gasped, struggling for air. "Something's wrong."

To her surprise, the old woman did not make a move to help her. Instead, a smile spread over her face. "I *did* know your father," she said. "Quite well."

Snow White looked at the old woman in shock. "What do you mean?" "I knew he was a fool," the old woman said.

Snow White's face grew paler. The woman's voice no longer sounded aged and craggy. It sounded strong, confident. It sounded familiar. Snow White's heart pounded as she realized who was standing in front of her—who had given her the apple. "You ... it's you ..." she said. Horror filled Snow White, and the world spun faster. The old hag was none other than the Queen. She had found her—and done something to her....

The Queen laughed, emitting a sound somewhere between a cackle and a snarl. "A pretty face, a note written in blood, and a quick knife in the back ..." she said with unfiltered delight. Snow White gasped as the Queen revealed what had really happened to her father years earlier.

Snow White's legs became weak, and she sank to her knees. Her heart felt like it was going to explode—from rage, anger, sadness, loss. She struggled to talk but found no words would come. Instead, she could do nothing but look up at the old woman as she went on, her voice becoming more gleeful with each evil revelation.

"His weakness cost him his throne," she said, "as it will cost you your life. And so, tell me, Snow White ..." Lightning struck the clearing and thunder boomed as the Queen leaned down and hissed into her ear, "Who is the fairest one of all?"

Snow White couldn't answer. The world was turning black around her. She was losing consciousness. She fell to the ground, and then, as the Queen laughed above her, her eyes closed. The apple dropped from her hand and rolled a few feet away, a single bite mark the only hint of what had just happened....



Doc's heart pounded, louder than their footsteps as they walked the last few feet to the cottage. He ran into the clearing and skidded to a halt when he saw what awaited them. Snow White lay on the ground, her skin ghostly. One of her arms was outstretched, a thin finger pointing in the direction of a shiny red apple that lay a few feet away.

Doc rushed forward and kneeled down next to the girl. Lifting her hand, he felt for a pulse. The others crowded around Snow White, fear and sadness etched on their faces. For a long moment, no one spoke.

Doc looked up, his eyes brimming with tears. Slowly, he shook his head. He didn't need to speak to make his words known.

As the seven of them took in the full measure of what that meant, rain began to fall. The Queen had won. They hadn't arrived in time to save their beloved Snow White. And now she was gone, taking her light from them, from everyone, forever.

Doc brushed away a tear and looked toward the edge of the forest. He wasn't sure for what. Jonathan? The young man was going to be heartbroken when he returned—if he returned. Or was Doc looking for some sign of the Queen? Was she lurking in the shadows, delighting in the devastation she had wrought?

It was no matter, Doc realized. Nothing could be done now. It would take a miracle to bring Snow White back to life. And he—and all the magical creatures of the forest and kingdom—had no miracles to offer.



Deep within the castle, the Queen stood in her chambers. She had changed back into her usual form and was staring at the mirror. The image reflected in the mirror was that of a woman pleased with herself—which the Queen most certainly was. She had gone straight to her chambers after arriving back at the castle. Snow White would no longer bother her. How could she when she was now trapped in an eternal sleep in the woods? A smile spread over the Queen's face as she thought back to the moment in front of the cottage. It had gone so perfectly.

She had watched the girl hesitate, seen the fear in Snow White's eyes and the internal battle as she vacillated between doing the right thing and trusting her instincts. It had been so easy to push her one way, using that ridiculous sob story about her father to get her to do exactly as the Queen wanted. Snow White really was as gullible as her father had been.

And now they were both out of the way, and the kingdom was completely hers.

If she had been the type of person prone to laughter, she would have thrown back her head and guffawed. Instead, she called to the mirror. The familiar purple smoke appeared in the mirror, and a moment later, the phantom's spooky white visage showed itself. "Your envious heart can be at rest.... You, my queen, are fairest of all."

The Queen's eyes narrowed. Was it her imagination, or did the mirror seem upset by this news? She shrugged. No matter. She didn't care how the mirror felt about the situation. As long as he spoke the words she longed to hear, he could say them crying, laughing, or screaming. She strode toward her balcony, pushed open the huge doors, and walked out into the darkness.

Below, the village was silent. The windows were shuttered, the candles dimmed. No one dared to defy the Queen with frivolity or happiness. Her victory, she thought with a smile, was complete as she looked upon their still faces. The town crier called out for all to hear, "All hail the Queen, fairest of them all!"

The silent villagers bowed solemnly as the guards echoed the crier, "All hail!"



With the guard's voices thundering from up above, Jonathan yanked at his chains. Through the small window at the very top of his cell, he could see the sky was brightening. And still he was desperately trying to free himself. No matter how hard he pulled or which way he twisted, the chains stayed firmly attached to the thick stone of the cell's wall.

Gritting his teeth, he pulled again, his eyes watering and his chest straining from the effort. Finally stopping, he sat there, panting.

"You've been at it for days. It hasn't moved," said the Huntsman.

Jonathan ignored him, continuing to pull as the Huntsman gave a deep, bone-rattling sigh.

"What's the point, anyway? Don't you understand? We've lost. She's more powerful than ever. Forget it."

Jonathan tilted his head. Snow White had told him what the Huntsman had done for her—how he had let her free, sent her racing through the woods away from the Queen. Clearly, that hadn't ended well for him. And if Jonathan knew anything, it was how to use others' disadvantages to his advantage. It came with the whole thief persona—though he was most certainly putting that lifestyle behind him if he ever got out of there and back to Snow White. But for the moment? He would get help however he could.

"I did forget. Before I met Snow White? I forgot what courage was. She fought with us when she had every reason to run. She didn't give up on us. I can't give up on her."

The Huntsman stared at him thoughtfully, as if he were considering what Jonathan was saying. Then he stood and joined the younger man at the chain. They both grabbed hold and pulled with everything they had. And yet nothing happened. Their eyes met, and Jonathan nodded. They gave it another pull with more strength than they'd ever been able to muster before.

Suddenly a whine of metal squealed into the air as the bolt retracted an inch. Jonathan and the Huntsman shared a grin. The sound of metal on metal had been all the encouragement they needed. They pulled in bursts, harder and harder, as the bolt continued to slide from the wall at the painfully slow rate of fractions of inches.

"Pull—harder—" the Huntsman encouraged.

Not knowing where their energy came from, the two pulled harder than they'd ever pulled before. Finally, the bolt pinged as it clattered to the ground. For the briefest of moments, the two men stood there, panting and sharing a smile.

The Huntsman nodded. "Go. Before the guards return."

Jonathan fixed him with a steely look of intent. "I'm coming back for you."



There was not a dry eye in the forest. The seven had spent the past day creating a resting place for Snow White. None of them had the heart to dig a hole and bury the beautiful young girl. Even in death, she radiated light, and it seemed wrong to keep that from the forest creatures and inhabitants that had come to love her as their own.

So instead, they had created a beautiful bed of wildflowers and lowered her onto it. They had crafted a tent of branches over it and placed a canopy of purple flowers above. Her dark hair fanned out around her, and her hands were clasped over her chest. She looked peaceful, and it was easy to forget that she wasn't just napping. But then a leaf would land on her still fingers, and Doc and the others would be reminded of what had really happened—

of what the Queen had done to Snow White—and anger and rage and sadness would well up in all of them. Without Snow White there, several fights had broken out among them, but they hadn't lasted long.

They gathered flowers and greenery and added it to Snow White's resting place. Tears fell unabashedly from their eyes as they worked. They were connected by their grief.

Now, as the morning mist began to lift, they all gathered around Snow White. One by one, the seven friends approached the princess. Holding their hats in their hands, they bowed their heads to the young woman. Dopey, unable to say the words that filled his heart, began to cry. Putting an arm around the youngest, Doc let him sob into his chest. No one was spared the sadness of the moment. Not even Grumpy.

Standing back from the others, he stared at Snow White. As usual, his arms were crossed. But as he looked upon her beautiful face, they slowly fell to his sides. At the same time, a single tear dripped down his cheek. Then another. And another. Soon Grumpy was sobbing as well.

Rubbing a hand gruffly over his face, Grumpy took a deep breath and approached Dopey, who looked up, his eyes red-rimmed. To everyone's surprise, Grumpy reached out and placed a hand gently on Dopey's arm. Then he nodded, as if to say, *I know you hurt*. *I hurt, too*. As Happy wiped away a tear, Grumpy leaned down and placed a bouquet of wildflowers by Snow White's side.

They all sank to their knees, surrounding Snow White in a circle of friends and animals. Overhead, the sun rose higher, mocking their sadness with its brightness.

They stayed that way, quiet and lost in their thoughts, for some time. Without saying it aloud, they had all agreed to stand vigil until ... until what or when, they didn't know.

There was a rustling in the forest. Looking up, Dopey saw Jonathan emerge from the trees. The young man's clothes were a mess. There were leaves in his hair and scratches on his face. But the worst thing of all was his devastated expression when his eyes landed on Snow White.

Dopey nudged Doc, who turned and, spotting Jonathan, nudged the next. It continued that way until they were all aware of Jonathan's presence. They got to their feet, making way for him to approach Snow White. He did so slowly, his shoulders heavy, his head low.

When he reached Snow White's side, he dropped to his knees. His whole body seemed to sink into itself as he stared at her still form. His hand twitched at his side, as if he was resisting the urge to reach out and touch her cheek.

Doc watched, his heart aching for the young man. From the looks of him, he had done everything in his power to get to Snow White before the Queen did. And he had failed. Now the guilt of that clearly weighed as heavily on him as the loss of all that could have been. Doc might have been the head of the group, but he had a heart, too—a big one. And it hurt—for Jonathan, for his friends, for the bandits, for the kingdom, and for Snow White

He walked to Jonathan and put a hand on his back. He could feel the young man's rapid heartbeat and knew Jonathan was on the verge of losing his composure.

Choking back a sob, Jonathan finally tore his gaze from Snow White and looked at Doc. He gave him a small smile of thanks. Then, taking a breath, he composed himself. Reaching out, he gently placed his hand on top of Snow White's. He looked down at his rough fingers atop her smooth ones, and Doc knew what he was thinking without the words being spoken: Had he been a fool to believe that dreams could come true? That they could have found each other and lived a happily ever after of their own making?

When Snow White's hand did not move, Jonathan's face grew sadder. The Queen had taken her from him—from all of them. With nothing left to lose, Jonathan leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on her lips.

It was just a brush, the faintest whisper of a kiss, but it held his heart and all the promises he would never be able to make. It was a kiss of pure, true love....

Pulling back, Jonathan moved to stand. There was nothing more he could do. He needed to leave this place, fill his head with thoughts of anything but Snow White.

And then Snow White's eyes fluttered open.



Snow White didn't want to open her eyes. Her head ached and her limbs felt heavy. But something was pushing her to wake up: a tingling sensation on her lips that slowly spread through her body, replacing the sluggish feeling with lightness. Hope flared in her chest, and she thought she heard a dozen people inhaling collectively. Taking a breath of her own, she opened her eyes.

The first thing she saw was Jonathan's face. He was hovering above her, a look of awe and wonder etched into his handsome features. She felt a smile spread over her own face when she realized that he had kept his promise. He had come back for her. Reaching out, she took his hand in hers and squeezed. His eyes filled with tears, and for a moment, she wondered why. She turned her head and saw everyone gathered in a circle around her. They looked exhausted, their own eyes brimming.

And then she remembered.

The hag! The apple! She had taken a bite and then could do nothing but listen in horror as the Queen revealed herself and her evil intentions. The last thing she recalled was the wicked laugh echoing through the forest, and then everything had gone dark.

But now there was light. She saw it radiating from Jonathan. She felt it in her lips, where he must have kissed her to break the Queen's curse. Wasn't that how those things worked? The Queen hadn't said as much, but true love *was* the most powerful thing in the world—which meant ... Jonathan loved her?

Her heart bursting, Snow White slowly sat up. For a long moment, she stared into Jonathan's eyes, silently thanking him. Then she leaned forward and kissed him right back.

All around her she heard gasps of astonishment.

"What in the world?" Doc said, his cheeks turning redder than usual at the kiss.

"I can't believe it," Grumpy said.

At that, everyone began to cheer. The tension that had filled the clearing broke as everyone celebrated. Snow White watched them, marveling at this family she had found in her darkest moments. She felt as if she were waking from a nightmare to a dream she could never have imagined.

Sensing Jonathan's eyes on her, Snow White turned back to him. Gently, he reached up to cradle her face with his hands.

She smiled, lifting her own hand to rest on his. There was so much she wanted to say. So much had changed. But then she thought of the Queen and her vicious words, and her smile faded. She got to her feet and moved away from the bed of flowers she had been resting on to a spot where she could be alone.

Jonathan waited a moment and then followed. He stood at her back. She knew the others were watching, as well. They were confused by her reaction. She should be happy, too. She had escaped the Queen's curse. But now she knew the truth: her father had not been so lucky.

"What is it?" Jonathan asked, putting a hand lightly on her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Snow White nearly cried at the kindness in his voice. She had spent so much of her life alone, hiding by a well, whispering wishes no one could hear. Her voice shook as she answered. "My father. He's gone forever ... murdered by the Queen."

She heard the hushed gasps of her friends and the bandits, who had just arrived. Her announcement didn't impact just her—it impacted the entire kingdom. For so long, the one thing that had kept hope alive was that the King might still be there, just in hiding. But the Queen had dashed that dream when she found Snow White in the cottage. As the seven kneeled, hats in their hands, in deference to the fallen king, Snow White's heart ached for all of them. Most of all, she ached for what the Queen had taken from her—and from what she had revealed to her.

"Oh, no!" Doc exclaimed.

"What will we do now?" Happy asked.

A hush fell over the clearing as Snow White hung her head in sadness. She knew that was not what her friends expected of her. They wanted her to reassure them that everything would be all right. But she couldn't—not anymore. The Queen had shoved her hope and fairness in her face and proven they were useless. Being brave wouldn't bring back her father. Being fair wouldn't stop the Queen. Being honest only made people hurt.

She wasn't sure how long she stood like that, letting the silence envelop her and the hurt flood her heart. She didn't know how to move on from there. Where would she go? She couldn't go back to the castle. And the cottage would be too crowded. She lifted her head and saw Jonathan watching her, an unreadable expression on his face. The bandits stood

behind them, and for a brief moment, she wondered if she might not join them on the road. She had managed to outwit the Queen's guards. Maybe she would be of use to the thieves.

She sighed. She knew that was as silly an idea as all the silly wishes she had spoken into the well. Her future was blurry and bleak.

Then a single snowflake floated down from the sky, dancing gently before landing on Snow White's nose. And she smiled softly, knowing what had to be done.

"It's time."

"Time ...?" Jonathan questioned.

"Time to restore our kingdom," Snow White declared with a strength that she had always wondered whether she possessed.

The weight of Snow White's words created a heavy blanket of gravity that covered them all. No one responded. They all looked toward each other as they wondered how they would go about such a momentous task. "It won't be easy," Snow White said. "She'll do everything she can to stop us "

"Let her try," Dopey said.

The youngest of the seven friends, who had not uttered a word in over two hundred years, was speaking in front of everyone. His cheeks were red, his hands a little shaky, but he was doing it. Because of Snow White's kindness, Dopey had found his voice.

"Dopey?" Snow White asked, watching the miner toe the grass with his shoe as he tried to pretend that all eyes were not on him.

"We're not afraid."

Listening to Dopey, Snow White realized that she didn't have to be afraid, either. She was fearless, fair, brave, and true. These traits didn't make her weak. They made her strong. And no matter what the Queen said, those attributes were what had made their kingdom great. She stared around at her new family, the one she had chosen, and realized that as much as she had helped them, they had helped her. Without them, she would never have known the strength hidden in her heart. In finding them, she had found herself.

Standing up straight, Snow White let the last of her self-pity wash away. There was no denying it: she would never be the same person she had once been. When she bit the apple, a part of her innocence had been taken from

her. In that way, perhaps the Queen had won. But she had only won a battle; she hadn't won the war. If anything, she had helped clear the way for Snow White to seek victory. For only in being shown the truly ugly nature of the Queen could Snow White see the absolute beauty in the love and strength of her friends—of herself. Her innocence might have been lost, but now she had an idealism and a sense of reality that was grounded in what truly mattered. Not the approval the vain Queen so desperately sought that left her alone in a stone fortress. Life was far more than that. It was warmth, a hand in a hand, a hug when you needed it. It was sacrificing yourself for the one you loved, and it was taking a chance on the uncertain future.

"Then neither am I," she said, a new strength in her voice. She paused and looked around at the group—at Jonathan's clear eyes, her seven friends' wide smiles, and the bandits' raised brows. "Follow me."

The clearing erupted in voices and chirps and squawks as everyone—human, magical creature, and animal—began to speak at once. There were shouts of "Yes!" and "Let's do it!" along with groans of "We couldn't!" and "It's not possible." Snow White let them react. She had expected as much.

But as they got closer to the edge of the forest, everyone and everything began to grow quieter and quieter, until there was silence.

Far in the distance, beyond the village, the castle loomed; Snow White felt it was watching and waiting for them. Taking a deep breath, she looked at Jonathan. His eyes were kind, and strong, and they told her that he and his group of bandits were on board with any plan she came up with. With a simple nod of her head, she signaled that it was time.





Some white was nervous. It was one thing to come up with a plan from the safety of the woods, surrounded by friends who supported her. It was an entirely different thing to put the plan in action—a plan that meant facing off against the evil woman who had tried to kill her and very nearly succeeded.

But with her newfound inner strength, and a hodgepodge army of humans, magical creatures, and wild animals, Snow White was ready to take action. She made sure everyone knew what they were to do, and they began the journey back to the castle. Before she could do anything else, Snow White needed to confirm that the villagers would be on her side. It had been a long time since she had visited them. She worried they would not take warmly to her return. She lifted a hand to her locket and rubbed her fingers over the well-worn words. She would just need to have faith—in them and in herself. If Jonathan was right, the villagers were not fans of the Queen. No one was. She hoped to remind them that there was hope—that there could be light.

She would take it to them.

While her race from the orchard and the Huntsman had seemed neverending on that cold night not long before, Snow White was surprised by how quickly they arrived at the castle. She looked across the moat up at the imposing stone walls and the gate, beyond which was the Queen. The iron bars were shut, as they had been since the Queen's hostile takeover.

Snow White turned and focused on the road that led from the castle to the village. She wasn't ready to approach the guards. Not yet. Making her way along the edge of the forest with a cloak pulled over her head to hide her telltale hair and familiar face, she went ahead. Jonathan hadn't been a fan of this part of the plan—the part where she would boldly walk into the middle of the village with no one beside her.

But it was a risk she was willing to take.

She stepped onto the road. The village was quiet. The houses and shops were all shut up tight. The shutters were sealed, and the doors locked. Snow White felt a tear rise in her eye. It was such a stark contrast to her childhood days, when doors were thrown open and children ran down the street, their laughter echoing off the buildings. Now it was almost like a ghost town. She wondered if the villagers kept everything shut so they wouldn't have to feel the Queen's gaze on them from her lofty balcony. Snow White didn't blame them. Living with the woman had been torture. And she had been protected, in some way, by her title. These poor people were at the mercy of her every evil whim.

Not for long, though, Snow White thought as she continued walking along the road. Hearing the footfalls, a townswoman opened her door and nervously peeked out. Then another door opened. And another. Children peeked out through the windows, and a slow murmur began to grow. In her cloak, Snow White remained a mystery. But her actions—boldly walking through the village under the watching eye of the castle—signaled something the villagers had long ago lost. It signaled hope. This person wasn't backing away from the Queen in the castle. It seemed, in fact, that she was there to stand up to her.

Snow White heard the murmurs and the whispers. She felt a shift in the air as she continued her long walk toward the gate. She took a deep breath. This was what she had planned—to be a symbol of inspiration. To let her bravery make others bold. She reached up and pulled back her hood. She heard gasps as the villagers realized who she was. Her name was muttered in every doorway.

Suddenly, a little girl poked her head out from behind her parents' legs. From the doorway of her cottage, she stared at Snow White with wide eyes.

Then, before her parents could stop her, the girl darted out into the street and ran to join Snow White. She fell into step beside her. Looking up, she gazed into Snow White's eyes with such hope that Snow White couldn't help smiling.

"Oh!" the girl said, returning the smile and nearly jumping with joy. Snow White reached down and gently squeezed the girl's shoulder. Then she nodded to everyone staring at them as if to say, *Join us, follow me*.

Dropping back, the little girl let Snow White go ahead.

But now she wasn't alone. This was the moment the townspeople had been waiting for. One by one, they walked out of their cottages and began to follow Snow White. Like a wave growing as it moved to shore, the crowd swelled until the entire village was out, moving toward the castle. The ground shook beneath their feet, and Snow White's heart filled. They were with her! They hadn't abandoned her. Her parents' legacy had not faded with their deaths, and now the same people who had trusted them were turning to her to lead. They hadn't said as much, but it was evident in their march toward the castle.

Reaching the bridge that led across the moat to the castle, the crowd slowed and then stopped. Snow White turned and gave them a reassuring smile. They might support her, but they still feared the Queen. And the Queen had forbade them to step foot on castle grounds. From there on, it was up to Snow White.

She hoped that everyone was following the plan. Just thinking about them all gave her the strength to walk the final distance over the bridge. She came to a stop in front of the single guard standing at the gates.

He drew his weapon. Behind him, ten more guards appeared, weapons raised. Snow White didn't put up a fight. She didn't lift a hidden weapon from her cloak. She didn't scream or make demands. She simply stood, letting the guards take in the crowd of villagers behind her. Realizing that the numbers were not in their favor, they murmured softly among themselves. Snow White was certain the Queen was watching them at that very moment, no doubt furious at seeing Snow White alive and already plotting her demise.

Snow White lifted her chin. The thought didn't bother her—not anymore.

"I believe you're looking for me," Snow White finally said. She kept her head up, her shoulders straight. Even with ten pairs of eyes, and an equal number of weapons, trained on her, she wasn't going to give them the satisfaction of her looking nervous. The Snow White who had left the castle might have cowered. But she wasn't that girl anymore. The Queen's revelation, Snow White's own near-death experience, and the friendships she had forged in the woods had made her realize the strength her father had always known was inside her.

As if sensing the difference, the Captain of the Guard hesitated for a moment, unsure what to do. But the sudden appearance of the Queen had him facing forward, awaiting her command.

"As a matter of fact, I believe it's you who's looking for me," the eternally calm voice said behind a facade of indifference. She looked at the Captain of the Guard and his men and gave her order. "Stand aside."

The guards parted, falling in line, forming a pathway down the bridge for the Queen to confront Snow White. Her dark eyes stayed on the beautiful girl, never acknowledging the villagers who stood behind her, glaring at the Queen with hatred.

Walking over the familiar stone toward the castle that had been her home, Snow White found herself looking at it with fresh eyes. She had spent so many years with her head down that she hadn't seen how much the Queen's presence had changed the place. Gloominess pervaded the whole area. Flowers no longer bloomed on the once well-loved plantings. Moss grew thick on the stone, and the windows were shut, keeping prying eyes from looking in. It was an unwelcoming place—a far cry from the castle of her youth.

For now, at least.

"This was my father's house. You killed him and stole it from him—from all of us. We're here to take it back," Snow White said loudly, her voice ringing out for everyone to hear. The Queen's eyes bored into SnowWhite, and the girl saw myriad emotions flash behind the brown irises. Rage, disappointment ... perhapsa touch of fear.

The Queen smiled in amusement, finally glancing at the stone-faced people around her as if she were letting them in on a joke. "Pretty, isn't she?"

Out of nothing, a beautiful ruby-red rose materialized in the Queen's hand. She toyed with it gently, inhaling its beautiful fragrance before twirling it softly with her fingertips. "Delicate. Elegant. Exquisite."

Her tenderness turned to violence faster than a snap of the fingers as the Queen crushed the rose, grinding it into a gray ash that fell to the ground at their feet and scattered away on the wind. "*Pathetic*," she finished.

Snow White could hear the villagers begin to murmur, troubled by this display of dark magic. Their earlier courage was waning, but Snow White was determined that her own would not.

But the Queen was just getting started. "You think you want a flower. But a flower wilts," she taunted them. "A flower can't keep you safe. Or lead a kingdom. Or raise an army. A flower can't give you what I can give you...."

This time, what materialized in the Queen's hand was a dagger—an exquisitely crafted weapon that shone with encrusted diamonds. They caught the light of the noonday sun and sparkled as she turned it over in her palms again and again.

The villagers began to gasp and murmur louder. The sudden appearance of fear at her actions made the Queen smile as she continued, "Perfection. Power. *Beauty*."

The edge of the blade was razor-sharp and slid through the cloth of Snow White's cape. The two halves fell off of her body and pooled at her feet.

Snow White stared down at the red material until she heard the gasps. Her eyes rose, and she saw that the Queen was holding the dagger out to her, her dark eyes and smug smile daring her to take it.

"But go ahead," she said. "If you want the throne ... take it." The Queen reached for Snow White's hand and placed the dagger firmly in her palm—with the blade pointed back toward the Queen. "Prove me wrong."

Snow White's mouth dropped open in shock as the Queen handed her the knife and then lifted her chest, waiting. Did she really expect Snow White to stab her? Here? Now?

Snow White's heart beat as fast as a drum as she stared at the beautiful instrument of pain that lay in her hand. If she were to turn it on the Queen, she would get her life back, and so would the villagers. Wouldn't they? Or

would the idyllic life she had known before her mother passed away be just a dream that could never be recaptured?

While the idea of permanently removing the Queen from her life—from *everyone's* lives—had crossed her mind, she hadn't actually thought she would kill her. It seemed wrong, like something the Queen would do but something her father, or her mother, would never entertain. The Queen had said this would prove she was the rightful ruler. But what kind of ruler would she be if she started her reign in blood? She would be no better than the Queen.

Snow White closed her eyes, unable to look at the Queen any longer. There was something desperate in her face. It was an ugly look on the woman, and despite the Queen's beautiful features, Snow White could see bits of the old crone shining through. Yet still she did not want to bring her harm. She thought of all the times she had sat at her father's side as he had handed out judgment to those who had done wrong. He had always listened to them state their case, his eyes, ears, and heart open. And no matter what they had done, her father had always been thoughtful and wise in his punishment. She had meant what she'd said when she first met Jonathan. Her father's punishment had always fit the crime, and it had never been violent. That was not the way the Queen ruled. Violence, anger, and humiliation were the ways she wielded her power.

Did she deserve a harsh punishment? Absolutely. There was no question that what she had done to the King, to the kingdom, and to Snow White herself could not be ignored. But Snow White refused to meet violence with violence.

Sensing her hesitation, the Queen stepped closer. She looked at Snow White quizzically.

The sound of a tapping foot snapped Snow White out of her musings. "They're waiting ..." the Queen taunted, her voice a touch colder now.

Snow White's fingers encircled the handle of the blade—the sharp edges of the diamonds cutting into her palms. But as much as she wanted to end things, and as much as she knew the Queen deserved it, it was not her way of seeking retribution.

The Queen had known this all along. She called to her guards as the townspeople looked on in disbelief, and swiped the blade back. "Enough of

this charade. You, hold her," she said, motioning to the first guard that had stepped forward. "Let the people see her die."

Cries and gasps filled the air as the townspeople attempted to surge forward. But the Queen had anticipated their reaction and had motioned her guards to block the way, which they did with drawn weapons.

Snow White stood bravely in front of the Queen, her head held high, her face showing no regrets as two of the soldiers grabbed her arms. She looked between the two of them, showing them that she did not hold them accountable for the actions the Queen was commanding. Then she realized that she knew one of them. "Paul," she said softly, her voice building as she continued. "You were a farmer. In the Western Vale."

The guard closest to her stopped suddenly.

"You have a wife. Eleanor."

At the name of his beloved, Paul looked up into the crowd. Almost instantly he spotted his wife standing among the people, tears in her eyes as she stepped forward to stand closer to Snow White. "You had a grove of cherry trees, and every spring, you would invite the village to come pick them. Share them."

Snow White turned to look at the other guards. Unlike the Queen, she saw them as people with lives and stories of their own. "Matthew. You were a baker. Just like your father."

His father, leaning heavily on a cane, also stepped forward.

"You never turned anyone away who was hungry. Even if they didn't have a single coin in their pocket."

The Queen's eyes leapt back and forth between Snow White and the guards. Fury filled her face, and her hands clenched into fists at her sides. "*Enough!*" she snarled at Snow White.

"Arthur. William. I remember you. All of you," Snow White said, addressing the men one by one. She saw their expressions softening. She was getting through to them—not with fear, as the Queen would have done, but with something far more powerful.

Paul nodded at her words, his hand lowering ever so slightly. Snow White turned to another guard. In the stillness on the bridge, she realized she knew them all. These were men she had grown up with—men who had not wanted to be part of the guard but who had been conscripted by the Queen and had accepted their assignments out of desperation. These were

kind, gentle souls who had once made their living from the land, nurturing the ground, caring for the animals. They weren't evil; they were the victims of evil. Snow White took another deep breath and continued to speak to them; she continued to remind them of who they were—and who she was.

"I said enough!" the Queen thundered, but for once, she was not the center of attention.

"There was a time we lived with hope," said Snow White. "When we knew that the true beauty of this kingdom was our kindness. When good things were nurtured and allowed to grow. I remember it. Do you?"

A long pause followed her question. And then Paul, the farmer with a wife named Eleanor, who used to grow cherries, released Snow White with the words "I remember."

The gasps of horror turned to wonder. "I remember," Matthew echoed, releasing Snow White's other arm.

"And I ..." said a third, laying his poleax down on the ground.

"And I," said the Captain of the Guard as he unsheathed his sword and laid it on top of the poleax.

Her mouth open in astonishment, the only thing the Queen could do was watch. She couldn't believe any of this was happening.

Softly at first, but then with rising vigor, the people began to cheer as—one by one—all the guards laid down their weapons.

The Queen shook as her rage built. She couldn't believe what was taking place in front of her. "You won't even make it inside the castle walls!" she said to Snow White as she began to take small steps backward.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Snow White answered.

"So, listen. About your whole 'secret entrance' ..." someone called out. Everyone looked around, trying to figure out where the voice was coming from. To their surprise, Jonathan was on top of the gate, a wry expression on his handsome face.

"Maybe she should just rename it 'entrance." He smiled as the Huntsman stepped up next to him.

A shrill whistle pierced the air. It came from the courtyard of the castle, where the seven miners had disarmed the guards.

The Queen's face was flushed red. Her rage knew no bounds. But she had one last chance to defeat her foe. She stepped forward and raised the dagger high above her head, her eyes locked on Snow White.

A sharp ping rang through the air as the dagger flew from her fingertips, spinning quickly before falling to the ground next to a bolt.

In disbelief, the Queen turned to see one of the bandits standing on the parapet, crossbow held jauntily in hand.

"I am the rebel Quigg. Master of the crossbow!"

The smile on Snow White's face when she saw Quigg was a thing of beauty. Not only had he saved her life, for which she was eternally grateful, but it thrilled her to see that the "master of the crossbow" actually had a crossbow. All around her, the villagers roared with support and approval.

Snow White took the time to look around a bit closer and saw that all the parapets had been overtaken by her friends the bandits. They had done it. The castle was theirs!

"No. No—it isn't true!" the Queen called out as she rushed inside. Since the day she first walked through the castle doors, she had always commanded a room. She had never allowed emotion to dictate her actions. Her moves were cold, calculated. But now she ran without a plan. As the Queen glanced over her shoulder at them, Snow White saw fear and worry crossing the woman's face, and she felt a pang of pity. The Queen had fallen so far. And to what end? Had she ever enjoyed her role as queen, or had she simply relished the title and the fear her beauty inspired? She had called Snow White weak for following her heart, but at least Snow White had a heart. At least she had a purpose beyond the superficial. Even in the woods, when she had been scared, there had been hope in her heart.

The Queen had no hope. Skirts in her hands, she fled up the stairs. Was the Queen trying to escape?





Snow White followed her. She had never set foot in the Queen's private space before. She knew the woman would spend hours in there talking to someone—or something—but until then, she had never known what the room held. Now she saw that it was empty save for a large ornate mirror.

Without being told, Snow White knew the mirror was magical.

The Queen stood in front of it, frantic and frenzied. Instead of escaping, she was pleading with the mirror, showing off her face, her form, her figure. She seemed to be trying to appeal to it with her exquisite features. "Look at me," the Queen begged the mirror. "Look."

The Queen held up her hand, showing off the rings that she wore on nearly every long, perfectly manicured finger. "Dazzling. Flawless. Every inch. I am still the fairest—"

But the phantom in the mirror interrupted the Queen. Snow White watched in stunned silence as the ghostly face appeared and began to speak. "Your Majesty, famed is thy beauty, but it goes no further than skin. For Snow White, beauty grows from deep within. And so, my Queen, at last you see: She will always be more fair than thee."

Snow White stepped close enough to the Queen that her reflection appeared behind her in the mirror. The moment that the Queen saw her, she boiled over with fury. "You lie!" she screamed at the mirror. She no longer

looked like her queenly self. She looked disheveled and scary. Backing away from the traitorous mirror, she shook her head and smashed it with her fists.

The mirror shattered into a thousand pieces, glass raining down, leaving an empty frame except for a few jagged shards. The rest lay on the ground like a jigsaw puzzle that could never be solved. Seeing what she had done, the Queen sank to the ground. Her fingers tore at the pieces, trying to find ones that fit, but as she worked, her true image appeared in the fragments. Gone was the beautiful queen Snow White had known. Now she saw the hag staring up at her from the broken mirror. Her eyes were on separate pieces, her mouth on another. She was like a bizarre painting that made no sense.

As Snow White watched, with a mixture of horror and relief flooding her, she saw the Queen's body begin to change. It began to disintegrate like the rose she had made earlier, turning to ash, falling to where her feet had been and fading in the wind.

Suddenly, the pieces of the mirror began to move, rearranging themselves and fitting together like a puzzle. As they did so, the evil queen was swept inside the mirror, screaming the whole time. And then suddenly, her scream was gone and there was utter silence.

The Queen was no more.

Snow White stared at the newly re-formed mirror, her mind reeling as the light inside it swirled to green. In the end, she had not had to destroy the Queen. The Queen had done that herself. With her own ugliness and hatred, she had brought her reign to a close. Despite all the evil the woman had done, Snow White felt a flicker of sadness for her. If only she had tried to offer kindness, perhaps things would have turned out differently. But the Queen had shown her true self. She was fearful, unfair, weak, and a liar. She had never loved the King or the kingdom. She had only loved herself. And in the end, that had been her downfall.

Taking a deep breath, Snow White lifted her chin. She knew now that her father would never return. But he lived in her. His lessons were a part of who she was and how she would rule—if the people would accept her. But she could not deny that the Queen, too, had made her the woman she was today. Because without the Queen's darkness, Snow White would never have appreciated the light. Without the Queen's coldness, Snow White

would never have appreciated the warmth of her friends. Without the Queen's ugliness, Snow White would never have discovered the true beauty of following her own heart.

While she would not cry tears for the Queen, she would not let her death be in vain. Staring at the reflection in the mirror, Snow White saw that she now wore the crown of the queen.

Snow White left the mirror chamber and walked back into the larger room. A smile lit her face as she saw the Huntsman and the guards waiting. Then Jonathan and her seven friends burst into the room.

The Huntsman approached. She waited for him, giving him a warm smile when he bowed his head.

There was a beat and then, one by one, those gathered—from Jonathan to Dopey, from Paul the guard to William—bowed their heads.

Snow White paused. Their message was clear. They did want her, and the weight of that fell on her shoulders. But it didn't cow her or make her feel scared. Instead, it filled her with wonder and awe. They saw in her what she had always been too fearful to see. They saw her bravery, her fearlessness, her fair and true heart. They saw that she could be a leader worthy of the kingdom.

She walked out onto the balcony and looked down at the courtyard. The whole village had gathered and was anxiously awaiting news. Snow White took a deep breath and stepped forward. Lifting her hand to her locket, she sent a silent thank-you to her father and mother. And then she gazed back down at the people—her people. It was time to bring light back to the kingdom. With a smile curving her lips, Snow White reached for Jonathan—whose expression mirrored her own. And in front of everyone, they shared a triumphant kiss.





Snow White no longer threw wishes into the well. She had everything she could wish for. The villagers and kingdom had welcomed her with open arms, and she had spent the past months making up for lost time. The gates to the castle remained open. The village was once again bustling while the fields were growing green with new crops. The forest folk had returned to the village, and again magic mingled with the everyday world.

Swaying under a brilliant blue sky, Snow White wrapped her arms tighter around Jonathan's neck. He squeezed her back. Their courtship had been slow but was steadily moving toward something that felt more real to Snow White than even the locket around her neck. In Jonathan's eyes, she saw herself reflected: a fair and virtuous queen, a kind friend, a brave soldier. She was everything she had wished for, and he was everything she had hoped to find. Tilting her head up, she pressed a kiss to his lips.

Breaking the kiss, she let out a happy laugh that became brighter as she saw Dopey and the others waving at her. Quigg and Maple lifted their joined hands in greeting while the other bandits traded farming tips with a group of villagers.

The harvest festival had returned. The unity it symbolized was on display everywhere she looked. As a group of firefly creatures flitted over her head, Snow White felt warmth fill her. They were all going to be okay.

The evil queen's presence was a distant memory. Now it was time to make new ones.

Pulling her friends toward her, Snow White felt a sense of peace settle over her. They would make new memories together. From the deepest mines to the castle walls, everything she had learned would never be wasted. She would follow in her father's footsteps, and one day, she hoped, people would tell the story of a kingdom, on the edge of a magical forest, where a fair and virtuous queen ruled for a long, long time.

THE END





When Snow White was a young girl, she loved to make apple pies for the villagers.



Now, Snow White listens to echoes from the wishing well.





The Queen, Snow White's stepmother, is the fairest in the land.





But the Queen isn't very nice to Snow White. She assigns her many chores, like scrubbing the steps...



and sweeping the floors.





While walking through the castle, Snow White finds a young man chained to the gate by the order of the Queen.

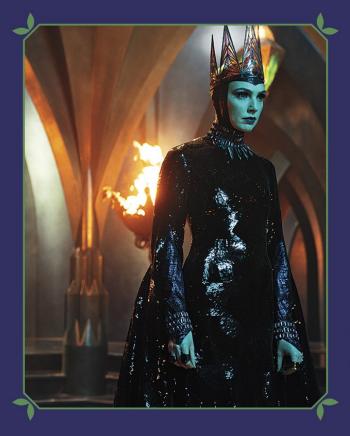


The young man is named Jonathan, and Snow White gives him bread to eat.





The Queen has a magic mirror. One day, it tells the Queen that Snow White is now the fairest in the land.



This makes the Queen angry. She sends her huntsman to the forest with Snow White with orders to get rid of the girl.





But the Huntsman tells Snow White to flee.



Snow White finds herself at a charming cottage in the woods.





The magic mirror tells the Queen that Snow White is still alive! The Queen is furious.



The Queen disguises herself as an old woman. She makes a poisoned apple to give to the girl.





Jonathan finds Snow White in the forest and wakes her from the Queen's curse.



With Jonathan's encouragement, Snow White returns to the castle and defeats the evil queen.

